8

Saekisan

ILLUSTRATION BY

Hanekoto

The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Release

The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Fan Translation

Saekisan

ILLUSTRATION BY
Hanekoto

Mahiru
Chitose
Ayaka

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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Amane Fujimiya

A second-year high school student who lives next door to an Angel. They recently started dating and Amane began to work on himself, becoming a person who can be proud of walking alongside Mahiru; holding his libido back counts, too.

Mahiru Shiina

A second-year high school student who lives next door to best romance MC. Devoted; caring; affectionate; not to mention cute as fuck, Mahiru is often the center of attention—whether she likes it or not. Loves Amane from the bottom of her heart.

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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Otonari no Tenshi-sama ni Itsunomanika Dame Ningen ni Sareteita Ken

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The Angel Next Door
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Vol. 8 Fan Translation

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Chapter 1

An Important Promise with the Angel

"...Tonight, is it okay if I don't go home…?"

For a moment, Amane couldn't wrap his head around what she had said.

The instant he heard that quiet murmur from within his arms, Amane's mind ceased to function. Quite some time passed before the meaning of her words really began to sink in.

'*...Is it okay if I don't go home*,' *huh…?*

In other words, she had timidly stated that she wanted to spend the night together with Amane in his house. He and Mahiru were indeed lovers and had spent the night together before, but this time was different. Mahiru had confessed that she wanted to stay the night, not just to support him, and not by accident, but because she wanted it for herself.

As his train of thought, which had slowed down to a fraction of its usual speed, began to truly process her intent, Amane's cheeks began to heat up like burning wood in a fireplace.

She really wants to stay the night. That's what she's saying.

As expected, even Amane could tell that Mahiru must have really pushed herself to say such brave words, especially with things as they were right now. In fact, as Mahiru leaned in closer to him, Amane could sense that she was somewhat tense—her body was trembling slightly. He was unsure whether this was because of embarrassment or the tension they had been building up between them.

Amane had never once thought that Mahiru would ask him such a thing, so he looked down, and Mahiru's delicate body trembled as she felt his gaze. Then she looked up at him, her face half-buried within his arms. He noticed that her eyes, which were more wet than usual, wavered as if she were torn between embarrassment and sweet expectation.

Amane gazed steadily back at her, and in response, Mahiru buried her face deep into his chest and listened to the sound of his heartbeat, as if to

escape from his attention. He could feel it, when Mahiru moved her lips as if she wanted to say something, perhaps wanting to scold him for his lack of response, but then Amane slowly cleared his throat and managed to squeeze out words in a voice that failed to hide his astonishment:

"...E-Erm. With… what intention…?"

"I–I meant exactly what I said. I don't… want to be separated from you, Amane-kun. I want to feel you close to me," Mahiru clarified.

No longer sputtering, Amane was now instead frozen stiff by what Mahiru had said, almost holding his breath in surprise. Mahiru then glanced up at him shyly.

"This much… is not enough. I bottled it up for two days. I want to… spend more time with you, Amane-kun."

"Th-That goes for me as well, but you know… well, wouldn't this be kinda bad?"

As Mahiru should be aware by now, Amane was a respectful man. Even so, if his girlfriend told him she wanted to stay over and they were in a situation where nothing and no one could get in their way, one thing could lead to another, and they could end up going *that* route.

Amane took pride in his strong will, but at the end of the day, he was a high school boy with a libido as strong as any other his age. Once the temptation of his beloved Mahiru fell upon him, he could instantly switch from being innocent and rational to a mindless beast capable of ravaging her.

Not wanting to put his desires before his reason, he thought that such a situation should be avoided at all costs. While it was possible that Mahiru may not desire to do the things he was imagining, instead having a pure and innocent desire to spend time with him, Amane's rationality urged him to prevent things from escalating too far nonetheless.

Mahiru continued to stare into his eyes as she responded, "For lovers, staying overnight is considered normal, right?"

"W-Well, maybe your average couple wouldn't be against doing that, but…."

"You mean to say that we aren't a normal couple?"

"I didn't mean it in that way. I just mean that, well, we've only been dating a few months."

"I have already stayed over with you back at your parents' house, Amane-kun. It's too late for that now."

"Ugh."

Amane was at a loss for words, and Mahiru began to look worried.

"...Are you against it… that much?"

"I'm not against it at all!"

Quickly reflecting on how he had raised his voice to deny her lonely words, Amane resolutely looked into Mahiru's eyes, which were now frozen with surprise.

"This goes without saying, but of course I'm happy," Amane continued, "I'm delighted that you say you don't want to leave me, and I want to be with you more as well. After all, I'd even sleep with you every night if I could."

Relieved, Mahiru blushed at the words '*every night*,' and while Amane considered that it may have been too early to tell her that, he still wanted to let her know that he wanted to stay by her side. He made sure not to look away.

"That said, I don't know what'd happen, and I'd hate it if I was the only one who got lost in the moment. I don't want to do anything that you don't want me to do, Mahiru. …Haven't you thought about what I might do to you if you slept over?"

"I place my full trust in you, Amane-kun."

Mahiru spoke without hesitation, and Amane tried to convince himself that she simply wanted to sleep with him by her side. This was born from the trust that she had in him, trust that he would not harm her.

Amane wanted to grant that wish of hers, and just as he was deciding that it was time to strengthen his resolve, Mahiru gave him a small poke.

"Please don't misunderstand me. It's not as if I am taking advantage of your trust or anything like that, but if there's anything you would like me to do, then… I'll accept it, head on."

"Huh?"

"Amane-kun, you are the kind of person to take full responsibility, right?"

"Th–That goes without saying. As a person, and as your lover, I swear I won't do anything irresponsible to you, Mahiru."

"In that case, there are no issues."

"I guess you're right."

Isn't that the same thing as using my trust against me? Amane thought, but Mahiru gave him a reassuring smile, showing the true depth of her trust in him, so there was no way he could allow himself to betray that feeling.

Amane wondered if he could really maintain his discipline, and although he was extremely anxious thinking about the upcoming night, if he wanted to spend it with Mahiru, refusal based only on worry was not an option.

He wanted to stay by her side. Even if that proved to be a little stressful for his body.

He spoke out confidently to Mahiru, who was bundled between his arms, but when he met her eyes once more, she grew increasingly embarrassed. After avoiding eye contact for a while, Mahiru added, "E-Erm, I-I would like to ask you to be gentle… in a lot of ways."

Perhaps to show her willingness to go wherever Amane led, she pressed her body against him even harder. He didn't know whether to be embarrassed or pleased by her antics, so instead, he pursed his lips and hugged Mahiru back.

...How should I handle this?

Amane ended up accepting her proposal to stay over. But once he had calmly mulled it over, he reminded himself that he was about to cross a very dangerous bridge.

For the time being, Amane let her stay overnight under the premise that he wouldn't lay a finger on her. He knew that she would accept him no matter what he did, but he'd felt that the balance between his reason and instincts was crumbling, and recently, he had been leaning more towards *instinct*.

No, wait. I'll get questioned harder if I don't take the initiative here. Probably.

He could imagine Itsuki saying, "Now's the time to make a move!" But in truth, it was against Amane's wishes to give in to momentum and simply rush into things. If anything were to happen, Mahiru would be the one affected the most, so it was only natural for him to hesitate taking the next step.

He was aware of this possibly being overkill, but it was precisely because of the seriousness of that notion that this reason could not be ignored. He couldn't allow himself to entertain the idea that simply because he liked her and because they were lovers, that was reason enough to take the next step.

"...Well, erm, how about you head home and take a bath first? It's not like you can use your regular shampoo here, after all," Amane asked Mahiru, who had been laying silent in his arms, and she was suddenly flustered.

Even if she were to stay over, Mahiru would not be able to perform her usual skin care routine in Amane's house. There was also the issue of

providing her with a change of clothes. He had said what he did, believing that it would be more convenient for her to first prepare herself at her home, but for some reason, Mahiru's body trembled at his words.

Amane suddenly realized that a terrible misunderstanding might happen after telling her to take a bath, considering the atmosphere they had between them right now, and sure enough, Mahiru squirmed about in his arms as if she couldn't stand it.

He hurriedly tried to clear up the misunderstanding, "Y-You've got it wrong, okay? I didn't mean it that way, y'know?"

"E-Erm… Amane-kun."

"Yes?"

Amane was worried that she may have taken his words too seriously, but once she looked up, he realized that Mahiru didn't seem to be embarrassed by his words, and instead felt quite the opposite.

"Shihoko-san and Shuuto-san… they took their bath together, did they not?"

"W-Well, that's true, I guess?"

"I–I don't mean anything by this. I really don't, but… erm, since I'm already staying the night, I want… to take a bath. Together… with you," Mahiru suggested.

In response to the trembling voice of his girlfriend, Amane stared at Mahiru for a moment, unable to process what she had just said.

...Did she just say, 'Together?'

When it came to bathing, naturally, they would not be wearing clothes. In other words, they would be exposing each other's bodies without the cover of even a single piece of cloth.

If that were to happen, Amane couldn't be confident in his ability to hold himself back. He was sure that once that scene became a reality, he would forget about everything else and simply indulge himself in the soft skin before him.

Mahiru was more aggressive than usual, and Amane struggled to hide his embarrassment. His gaze darted around the room as he scratched his burning cheeks.

"I just, well erm, wouldn't that be… pretty bad? We'd be in there naked, after all…"

"E-Erm, that's…. I-If I wear a swimsuit, will it be okay?"

“W-Well, I can’t deny that wearing a swimsuit is a good idea, but... are you prepared to have your skin touched that much?”

Even Amane couldn’t guarantee he’d be able to keep his hands to himself if his lover was within arm’s reach in such a defenseless state. Whether she was aware of his thoughts or not, Mahiru’s long eyelashes fluttered as she cast her eyes downward.

“If we are going to wash each other’s backs, touching cannot be avoided.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“I-I’m not against it, just to make it clear. I like being touched by you, Amane-kun. If I were really against it, I would not have said something like this.”

“...True.”

Mahiru’s words truly had no underlying meaning; she simply wished for them to bond like Amane’s lovey-dovey parents often did. Since Amane understood that, he nodded and didn’t say anything more for a moment.

Amane gazed away for a second before turning to Mahiru again. “So in other words, erm, if I put on my own swimsuit, we’ll have an acceptable compromise, right?”

“Y-Yes.”

“You sure you’re alright with this?”

“A woman never goes back on her word.”

Amane thought that was a line more appropriately spoken by a man, but Mahiru seemed to have proposed the idea with determination, and he did not want to dishonor her courage. In short, it was just a matter of how much he could endure.

Now that Amane had found his one and only true partner, he too longed for a close relationship just like his parents. Starting off by sharing the bathtub wasn’t such a bad idea to him. As long as he could keep his desires in check, they would be able to maintain their strong relationship.

Since summer vacation had ended, he remembered that he had stored his swimsuit at the back of his closet, not expecting to use it again this year. Amane reached for it, muttering “Alrighty,” as he tried to quiet the thumping in his chest.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

Once he changed into his swimsuit and entered the bathroom, Amane felt extremely uncomfortable and nervous. Mahiru had told him to go in first, reasoning that it would take her a long time to get changed into her swimsuit, but the longer Amane was left waiting, the more his heart pounded.

Amane had seen her in a swimsuit once before, but this time, they would be in a closed, confined space together—just the two of them, alone. With this happening during a sleepover, naturally, Amane was more nervous than delighted.

In the first place, Amane had assumed that bathing together was only done by couples who were already *experienced*. The thought left him embarrassed and expectantly nervous.

Despite not being submerged in hot water, Amane's body had heated up. He pursed his lips as he agonized at the thought, unsure of whether he wanted Mahiru to come soon or not. As he mulled it over, he heard the door creak.

Turning around with awkward movements, Amane was greeted by the dazzling sight of his lover's flawless skin. Mahiru timidly looked at him.

The fact that Amane froze up the moment he caught sight of her was inevitable.

...So it was this, huh. The swimsuit Chitose had mentioned…

Chitose told him that day that Mahiru had bought two different swimsuits, and Amane was suddenly reminded of that fact.

This time around, it wasn't the swimsuit she had worn when they played around in the pool. What she was wearing now was a black bikini that contrasted heavily with her white, porcelain skin. There wasn't a single unnecessary decoration; it was just a simple piece of cloth covering her skin. Despite that, the surface area covered by the cloth was not small and could be classified as a normal bikini.

And yet, she looked sensational. It was likely due to her amazing figure.

As he had expected, no matter how many times he looked at her, Mahiru looked nothing short of phenomenal.

Everything, from her slender neck that flowed down to her décolleté, to the defined outline of her ample bosom, to her gently-sloping waistline, was eye-catching; her tight, yet undeniably soft body was exposed, and could be best described as the ideal figure.

Mahiru would normally not expose herself in general, and she especially was the type of person to rarely expose her chest, so Amane previously had

almost no chance of seeing it for himself. But now, she had made it clear that only he was allowed to lay eyes on her body.

It was an ultimate weapon she had brought out herself, but even the way she shamefully tried to hide the front of her body with her arms, perhaps because she felt his eyes on her, was sexy. The way she had positioned her arms caused her mountains to bunch together, and as a man, Amane could only call it a great view, but it proved hard to keep his eyes on the prize given his current state.

Regardless, Amane's gaze swam around as he struggled to look at her directly, though this seemed to bother Mahiru, as she frowned slightly.

"...Does it look strange?"

"N-No. That's not true. It suits you well, but..."

"But…?"

"...How should I put it? It's really stimulating."

Mahiru's cheeks turned red for obvious reasons as Amane murmured, trying to force the words out of his mouth.

She was likely keenly aware of this. Ordinarily, it would be a decision that Mahiru would never make. The bikini was made of nothing more than plain cloth and string, making it a little unreliable for hiding her skin.

"That's why I did not wear it at the pool. It would be embarrassing if other people saw me."

"Why'd you buy it, then?"

"W-Well, that's because… Chitose-san said that unless I did this, you won't succumb to me, Amane-kun."

"Just what am I supposed to be succumbing to…"

Rubbing his temples in response to Chitose's comment, he glanced at Mahiru again.

...Well, if I'm shown something like this, I might actually succumb to something...

That was just how destructive Mahiru's appearance was. Amane had a desperate urge to crouch down on the spot and keep her out of sight until he could calm himself down.

However, he was not going to get the chance, so he took deep breaths to regain his composure and glanced again at Mahiru. He felt like he almost couldn't stand the situation, or rather, it inspired an insatiable itch that he hesitated to scratch—a man and woman were in such a narrow space, barely dressed.

“Ah—Well, for now, let’s get our hair washed.”

“Y-You’re right.”

Mahiru nodded along in a way that seemed to betray her true feelings. She turned her head down to hide her cheeks, which were flushed despite her not yet soaking in the hot water. Then, she pulled out a bottle of liquid from the waterproof bag she had left on the bathroom floor.

Amane’s favorite shampoo was made specifically for men, so naturally, he wasn’t expecting Mahiru to use it. Mahiru had brought her own shampoo with her, but for some reason, he was also met with an awfully large number of other bottles.

Impressed, Amane wondered for a moment if girls always used so many different products when bathing. Mahiru then glanced over at him, saying, “If you would please sit on the chair…” and pointed at the chair with her finger.

In other words, she intended to wash him herself.

“N-Nah, I can do it… myself.”

“...I would like to do it.”

Amane knew what she was going to say, but was surprised by Mahiru’s direct yet modest statement. So, he allowed himself to be driven by her momentum, obediently taking a seat.

Mahiru stood behind Amane. Thinking that he was about to be washed, Amane was surprised to see that Mahiru was instead holding a hairbrush. Presumably, it was also an item she had brought with her.

“Your hair, Amane-kun. I’ve always wanted to take care of it at least once.”

Mahiru started to brush his hair, her prior tension vanishing from her face as she did so—or rather, she seemed pleased. *Ah. She definitely flipped a switch here*, Amane thought, and while it was better than acting awkward, Mahiru had a tendency to lose herself in her thoughts, when concentrating on a task, and get carried away. This time would be no exception, or so Amane was thinking.

As for Amane, he was grateful for the change in atmosphere. It allowed him to rid his mind of the tension building up due to the situation. Even if he would constantly try to hold back any physiological responses, his body tended to have a mind of its own.

Besides that, Amane also found Mahiru’s touch to be very comforting. He had once fallen asleep just by having his hair stroked during a lap pillow, so Amane was aware of how good it felt to be taken care of.

Thinking back to that time, Amane closed his eyes, intending to leave everything to Mahiru. He heard a small giggle from behind him.

"I see you've relaxed all of a sudden."

"Well, I mean, if you say you'll take care of it, Mahiru, then I'll let you do as you please. I know that you'll make me feel good, after all."

"I shall do my best to live up to your expectations."

Mahiru, who seemed delighted at the task she was entrusted with, replied with a smile as she carefully combed through Amane's hair.

"It is important to first remove any excess dust and dirt with a comb before rinsing under hot water. But your hair is short, Amane-kun, so you may not need to go to such lengths."

"So that's how it is. It always seemed like it was a pain, so I didn't bother brushing my hair before taking a bath."

"Your hair isn't just short, Amane-kun, but it doesn't tangle easily, either. It's naturally tidy, so perhaps you don't need to think about combing it too often. I have long hair that tends to tangle easily, so it is necessary for me to comb it."

"You must be pretty diligent to keep it looking so well-groomed, considering how long your hair is."

Amane opened his eyes and looked at Mahiru in the mirror; her hair was long enough to fall below her waist with ease. Despite that, no split ends could be seen, and her hair was in perfect condition. Her smooth, silky hair boasted a beauty that any girl would admire.

Amane admired her hair, thinking about how hard it must be to maintain, and heard a small giggle from behind him.

"Well, I have good hair to begin with, so I'm not extremely anxious about it… but I do pay attention to its quality. Tidy hair will look nice no matter what kind of clothes I'm wearing."

"...You really are so girly."

"I want to be proud of who I am, after all."

Mahiru stated as she finished brushing his hair and picked up the showerhead. Amane saw her reach for it and closed his eyes, knowing that she was going to rinse his hair with hot water.

Gently, Mahiru informed, "I shall begin rinsing now," as she tenderly sprayed water from the showerhead onto Amane's hair.

"Let's do a thorough pre-washing here. When using styling products, it's better to wash them off here to some extent."

“Looks like the lecture’s started.”

“Your hair is naturally good quality, Amane-kun, so it will be even better if you take good care of it.”

“That’s what I thought. Taking care of it every day would be troublesome.”

“You mustn’t get sidetracked when it comes to this,” Mahiru spoke in an exasperated voice, “Honestly, geez.”

Since Mahiru started washing his hair, the tension and embarrassment had completely faded. Their conversations carried on as usual as the awkwardness subsided.

“Well, I’m sure that bathing together will come naturally for us in the future, so let’s take it one step at a time,” Amane commented after considering Mahiru’s proposed daily care routine. He thought it would be a little troublesome to do that every day, but Mahiru, who was rinsing his hair under the shower, froze. Mahiru stood there for roughly ten seconds, before finally turning off the shower as if she had suddenly been thawed. In the mirror, Amane could see her silently squeeze out some shampoo and proceed to lather it on a loofah.

“E-Erm… Mahiru-*san*?”

“...It’s one of your downsides to be able to say such things so casually.”

“Ehh…?”

Mahiru’s cheeks flushed as she kneaded the foamy shampoo through Amane’s hair. He noticed that Mahiru started to handle his hair rather roughly. Or was that just his imagination?

“...I’m very happy, but you can no longer be exasperated by Shihoko-san now, can you, Amane-kun?”

He vaguely understood the meaning behind Mahiru’s words, and although late, he also realized what he had said to her prior. His cheeks also heated up.

He used to look back in dismay at his parents bathing together. But now Amane had implied that he, too, would bathe with his partner every day once they got married. He was in no position to talk.

“Amane-kun. I will be mad if you don’t zip your mouth right now.”

“I’ll be careful.”

The embarrassment that had finally faded from each other had returned, and both Amane and Mahiru blushed as they then silently focused on washing his hair. While doing so, Mahiru finished the hair treatment routine neatly and skillfully.

After thoroughly rinsing Amane's hair, Mahiru hesitated as she retrieved a bottle. It was labeled: *Body Soap*.

"...E-erm, um…… Y-Your body, too."

Amane, who had understood what Mahiru was trying to say, suddenly felt his body stiffen.

He knew that naturally, after having washed his hair, his body was next, but Amane had never guessed that Mahiru would propose the idea herself. She did say that she would wash his back, but he hadn't expected her to follow through with it.

"W-Well, erm… Ah—Y-You don't have to force yourself, you know?"

"I-I'm not forcing myself! E-Erm… even I can do this much. It's just that, erm… I would like you to wash your front… I-I will just wash your back."

"I-It'd help me out if you'd do that."

As expected, it would be a big deal for Mahiru to wash his front as well. Amane immediately nodded in response to Mahiru's words and looked down at his feet. His somewhat faded embarrassment from earlier was growing once more. Furthermore, his body was heating up even more, probably due to the situation going beyond his expectations.

Standing behind him, Mahiru diligently lathered body soap with the loofah. The sound of cloth rubbing against skin could be heard.

Amane was painfully conscious of the awkward atmosphere. They were in the bathroom, where only the sound of their breathing and the frothing of soap could be heard.

"...Erm… Then, please excuse me…" Mahiru whispered in a timid tone, perhaps having finished lathering the soap. Then, a soft, fluffy sensation spread across Amane's back.

Of course, Amane knew that it was simply finely lathered body soap. But in such a place, in such a situation, being in such close proximity to Mahiru, who was only wearing her swimsuit, it must have been a man's instinct to think even for just a moment that her fruits had brushed against him.

The sensation of the bubbles gently spreading across his back made him feel ticklish.

Mahiru moved her hands courteously, but since she was clearly applying the foam with utmost care, she must have felt a little nervous. Amane wasn't so attentive when he washed himself, so he wasn't used to that much care being put into the process.

“...Amane-kun, you have a surprisingly large back, do you not?”

He heard a small whisper surface once the foam had spread evenly across his back.

“*Surprisingly*, you say. Compared to your back, Mahiru, of course mine would feel bigger.”

“It’s because it’s yours that it feels so big, Amane-kun. Or should I say… I’ve grown used to relying on your back this whole time.”

And then, Amane felt a palm press up against his shoulder blade.

“Do you remember that time when I sprained my leg? You even carried me home on your back.”

“Yeah. I remember, I remember. That was when you saved the cat and got yourself hurt, right?”

“...At that time, I was really happy. I tried not to show it on my face, though.”

“You were really at a loss back then, after all.”

“...I think that you always look out for me, Amane-kun. You’re always there to support me.”

Abruptly, the palm still placed against his back slipped across his body, instead coming to rest on his flat chest, as she hugged him from behind. With the distance between their bodies now zero, Mahiru rested her lips on Amane’s shoulder, clinging to him firmly.

Feeling the presence of something far softer, and far weightier than bubbles press up against his back, Amane stifled a gasp.

“I’ll carry you as much as you want, Mahiru, and I’ll support you. Besides, I promised not to take my eyes off you, so I won’t just disappear or anything.”

“.....Yes.”

“But, well, this position is a bit hard to bear right now, so I’d appreciate it if you could let go of me.”

Once he implied that *they* were touching him, her body jolted. But there were no signs of her letting go.

“.....Even if you don’t carry me, I want you to stay close to me. Though, I will not dump all of the burden onto you. I want to walk with you, every step of the way.”

“That’s right.”

“Also, I heard that you would be happy if I were to do this when I sleepover, Amane-kun.”

"***Chitose—!***"

Amane unintentionally muttered, musing that although it was an interesting scheme, Chitose must have been subtly suggesting something else. "Chi-Chitose-san only gave me some advice, and I wished to do it," Mahiru quickly informed him as she wrapped her arms around him even tighter as if to soothe him.

Amane felt an even plumper sensation grace his back and couldn't help but groan.

It wasn't as if he was against it; he was definitely happy, but he felt as if the shackles that had kept him sane were being scraped away. The fact that Mahiru was clinging to him deliberately rather than accidentally was quickly whittling down his endurance.

"I-I get it now, so please step away from me. It's a bit of a problem... I don't want to overheat before I get in the bath."

It would have been ideal if he'd been able to enjoy himself candidly, but the current Amane lacked the composure to do that. He'd insisted that he wanted to cool his head and body off a little since he was *full of vitality*, but surprisingly, Mahiru obediently let go.

The reflection in the mirror clearly displayed Mahiru's reaction: timidly crouched down, she fidgeted at the embarrassment that rushed to her after the fact.

Mahiru, who couldn't decide whether to act bold or not, groaning "Uuuu," wrapped herself in her arms, grabbing her shoulders. Amane thought briefly that if she was going to get embarrassed, she shouldn't have gone so far with her stunt to begin with.

As for Amane, he now felt more relieved than embarrassed, so he smiled lightly and turned to face Mahiru. He gently snatched the foamy loofah from her hands.

"I'll do the rest myself, so you just do your own care routine, Mahiru."

"......Yes."

"You seem kinda dissatisfied, or is that just me?"

"N-No, not dissatisfied, or rather… e-erm, I had prepared myself for this, so it feels a little anticlimactic."

"Just what did you think I would pull in a place like this….?"

"W-Well, that's, erm…. Washing each other's backs."

"That was something you suggested in the first place, Mahiru... Or did you really want me to wash your back?"

“Th-That’s not it! It’s just, erm, you seem to not want to touch me, Amane-kun…”

Almost coughing involuntarily, Amane stared at Mahiru for saying something so outrageously dangerous, half out of embarrassment and half out of reproach. Mahiru’s face turned even redder.

“...B-But Shihoko-san and Shuuto-san always wash each other well.”

“Hearing that about my parents makes me feel complicated… Well, in the first place, my parents are married, so it may be too early for us… What I mean is that, w-well, rather than touching, maybe it’s better just to relax together in the bathtub.”

Amane proposed that idea, thinking that it would be safer to use the bathtub normally. Otherwise, his hand could slip into all sorts of unexpected places. In response to Amane’s words, Mahiru let out a, “...I-I understand,” sounding as if she had convinced herself.

Huh? Didn’t I just suggest something really outrageous? Amane questioned himself for a brief moment, but before that realization bombarded him with shame, “I shall take care of myself, so please turn the other way~” Mahiru spoke up in a poised manner. Amane was swept away by her newfound momentum and obediently turned his back.

Glancing toward the mirror, Amane noticed that Mahiru’s ears were bright red as they peeked out from between the strands of her hair. He dared not point that out, however, as Mahiru would find out that he had been looking at her, so he pretended to have not seen a thing. As they sat with their backs to each other, embarrassed, Amane continued washing the rest of his body.

Aware that Mahiru would take longer to wash than himself, Amane took the liberty of soaking in the bathtub first. However, Mahiru, as she finished tending to herself, glanced his way now and again, so he was at a loss for what to do.

Amane hadn’t the foggiest clue as to what she wanted to say. Without a doubt, she was conscious of the remarks about touching in the bathtub from earlier, but from Mahiru’s gaze, which looked as if she were hoping for something, Amane could tell that she wanted to ask for something from him.

It didn’t seem to be a matter of caution, but considering that he was worried about not being able to understand her feelings, he definitely noticed that Mahiru’s caramel-colored eyes wavered as she met his gaze.

“E-Ermm, where should I… soak myself?”

At the word '*where,*' Amane blinked once. This apartment was purpose-made for one or two people living alone, but the bathtub was fairly large. It was possible for two people to bathe together provided that they were careful of their feet, but at most, it would be a little cramped. Amane was careful not to stretch his legs out of consideration for Mahiru; that way, she would have plenty of space on the other side of the tub.

And yet, Mahiru had likely phrased that as a question due to Amane's prior slip of the tongue.

"...W-Well, it's pretty empty… you can just soak wherever you'd like."

Despite what he had said earlier, Amane couldn't very well tell Mahiru to come close to him, so he threw the choice back to her. Mahiru lightly pressed her lips together and made a pout before slowly climbing into the bathtub.

Just as Amane was expecting to be greeted with the sight of pure white skin, devoid of any suntan, a flaxen-colored veil enveloped his vision. "Ah—." Mahiru was sitting between Amane's loosely crossed legs as he let out a gasp.

Of course, while Amane had said she could sit '*anywhere*,' Mahiru settling herself down in between his legs was something he did not expect. Amane was stunned. Aware of this or not, Mahiru leaned against his body, placing her full weight on him.

Her hair was tied back, so Amane directly felt the touch of her bare skin. Whether he liked it or not, he was getting aroused.

"...You did say I could soak anywhere, right?"

Mahiru's cheeks were dyed red as she looked back at him with a modest yet almost triumphant smile. Amane wasn't able to comment on it, however, as his face and body had not yet calmed down; he simply replied, "Yeah, I did."

"In that case, there's no problem, right?"

Mahiru, who had said that clearly, to encourage herself, then suddenly headbutted Amane with the back of her head. He wasn't hurt, but it itched him both mentally and physically, so he gently grabbed Mahiru's shoulder to stop her.

Instantly, her body trembled greatly, and the sound of waves rippling echoed through the narrow bathroom.

"Perhaps I should leave after all?" Mahiru wondered to herself quietly.

"N-No, it's not like I'm against it... Erm, I-I was wondering exactly how we were going to touch each other," Amane replied.

“.....Was it not you who proposed that idea?”
“Well, that’s true, but…”

Mahiru now seemed to be confused, which Amane softly laughed at, so he gently wrapped his arms around her, musing that it wasn't as if he didn't understand how she felt.

Her body stiffened for a moment before she started to wriggle out of an overabundance of embarrassment, and the reason was obvious. Amane wanted to lightly embrace her, so he asked her to calm down.

"...Could you stop squirming for me?"

Amane knew that Mahiru would eventually quiet down even without him intervening, but just in case, he whispered gently into her ear. She shuddered again, but obediently stopped squirming. Instead, she settled herself further in between Amane's legs.

Amane was happy that she had calmed down. But at this rate, if this continued in the direction it seemed to be going in, both of them would quickly become too embarrassed to interact with each other at all.

...As expected, it's impossible for me to touch her without hesitating.

Amane had hesitated to touch her more than the time they were at the pool, but in this situation, it couldn't be helped. In this tight, but completely private space, they mutually consented to be stuck so close to each other. But, there was no way they wouldn't be conscious of it.

For the time being, Amane focused on the process of deciding how to act right now to distract him from other sensations, and gently embraced Mahiru as he normally would.

The scent of shampoo, which was stronger than usual, surprised Amane for a moment, but he was still able to keep his reasoning. In any case, he rubbed Mahiru's tense body to ease her tension.

Amane had never touched Mahiru's torso or stomach directly before, but it seemed that the way Amane gently hugged Mahiru was enough to reduce her tension and soothe her.

Mahiru, who leaned her head against Amane's arm, let out a sigh of content after being silent for a while.

In such a quiet room, the sound of their sighs could be heard clearly. They both listened quietly to the sound of water drops dripping from the faucet and rippling on the surface of the bathtub as it very slowly warmed their bodies.

"...Erm, Amane-kun, you won't start to hate doing this, will you?" Mahiru asked timidly.

For a while now, neither of them had said a single word. They quietly snuggled together while basking in the water, enjoying its warmth.

"...Th-This is something I have noticed myself, but I feel like I've been messing up and nothing I do ever works."

"Ah, so that's what it was. There's no way that I'd hate it. I know how much you like me, Mahiru, and that you're doing your best for me even though it's embarrassing for you."

"Please don't mention that, geez."

"I mean, it's true."

"I-If you realized that, then why don't you understand my intentions...?"

Mahiru muttered in a voice full of embarrassment, as her voice trailed off with each word, and she shrunk down between Amane's arms again.

Amane was not so dense that he misunderstood what Mahiru wanted or what she wished for. However, it would cause his desires to surface, and if he actually allowed himself to succumb to them, his momentum would likely be much greater than what Mahiru desired. He intended to keep tabs on his own behavior to prevent that from becoming a problem.

"...I'm not too confident I can control myself, so I would be troubled if you provoked me too much, young lady."

"You say that, but you have been looking rather composed for a while now."

"No, not at all. Feel free to check."

If she brought her ear close and listened to his heart, she would hear an obvious, unconcealable thumping.

Mahiru was a little hesitant after hearing Amane's suggestion, but then shifted herself to face him and put her ears on his chest, which had recently begun to look toned as a result of Amane's training.

Right now, Amane could hide his embarrassed face by soaking himself in the bathtub. However, it would be difficult to hide his rapid heartbeat. His heartbeat was faster than normal, and Mahiru blinked as she raised her head.

Amane smiled as he returned her gaze. "That's what I said, right? …That I can't keep my composure."

With Mahiru's consent, Amane had begun bathing with his first and only girlfriend. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to strip off her swimsuit. He wanted more.

The reason why Amane didn't do any of that was because he didn't want to hurt Mahiru. He felt strongly that it'd be wise for him not to act so rash, because it would affect their relationship forever.

"...I thought this was something you would have gotten used to," Mahiru mused.

"No way that's the case. I do want to touch you, and there are various other things I want to do as well; I'm just holding myself back," Amane replied.

"Va-Various things…"

Mahiru blushed, perhaps lost in her imagination. Amane flashed her a wry smile as he caressed her head and Mahiru let him do as he pleased, accepting him.

She sure doesn't get shy when I touch her like this, huh, Amane thought. He tenderly patted her head while he stroked her cheeks as his fingers naturally followed the shape of her face, tickling her with his fingertips.

Mahiru closed her eyes slowly and relaxed, surrendering herself to Amane.

Her sweet, yet unbelievably sexy attitude surely came from her deep trust in him. Amane softly placed his finger on her chin and kissed her once… but then quickly pulled back.

"Huh?"

"...If I kiss you like that here, I'm likely to make you overheat, Mahiru."

Amane wanted to give her a deep kiss right there and then, but if he were to do that while her body was already steaming, Mahiru would undoubtedly become light-headed and boil over.

French kissing in itself was something that neither of them were used to, and were unaware of the appropriate limits. Otherwise, they would both drown in each other endlessly.

Amane judged that it would be dangerous—both physically and mentally—and decided to finish up considering that the situation was whittling down his endurance, but Mahiru seemed disappointed. "...Is that so?" she said, almost as if she had been expecting something else.

Amane couldn't help but chuckle when faced with Mahiru's blatantly obvious reaction that showed her true feelings, and Mahiru began lightly hitting Amane's chest, forcing him to suppress a smile. He then traced around Mahiru's lips with the edge of his thumb.

Mahiru lips, which were smoother and more luscious than Amane's own, opened slightly, trembling at the mere touch of Amane's fingers.

"...Were you disappointed?"

"You're such a meanie for asking something like that, Amane-kun."

Now sulking, Mahiru softly hit his chest once more after being teased and turned her back, crouching down between his legs yet again.

Amane knew that she wasn't truly sulking, but it wouldn't be a good idea to poke fun at her embarrassment either. He promptly apologized with a "Sorry," and delicately wrapped his arms around Mahiru, pulling her close again.

Though hesitating at first, knowing that he faced inevitable embarrassment, Amane quickly shook it off by moving his arms slowly and carefully as he secured his grip. Mahiru was tugged even closer to him, and Amane's hands were now laid across her stomach.

Mahiru's back was almost completely uncovered, so each time their skin would suddenly touch, her body quivered.

While it was easy for Amane to understand why Mahiru trembled, there was nothing he could do to prevent it. In the first place, Mahiru had entered the bathtub like she did, despite being aware of Amane's hesitations, which was something that Amane also accepted.

"It's really warm here."

"...Yes."

"Are you fine with… staying like this for a little while longer?" Amane hinted that he wouldn't do anything strange to her and hugged Mahiru gently. Her tension faded and she obediently entrusted her body to Amane.

Feeling rather relieved that she had granted his request, Amane gently stroked her slender belly. Mahiru wriggled around like it tickled her.

Even when not submerged in water like it was now, Mahiru's skin remained smooth and pleasant to the touch—as if all unnecessary details had been wiped away. Despite the perfection of it, Amane noted how different it felt compared to his own skin, a strange sensation that could only be described as girlish softness.

While she found it vaguely confusing, Mahiru didn't seem to dislike having her belly touched by him. She lightly tapped his arm with her finger in protest, but as proof that she wasn't against it, Mahiru promptly switched tactics and started to caress Amane back.

With a splash, Mahiru enacted her tender revenge against Amane's arm. Suddenly, yet gently, she turned around, while continuing to press her weight up against him.

"Amane-kun."

"Hm? Something wrong?"

"Erm.... about what we were talking about earlier."

"Earlier?"

"About, erm… kissing."

Although Amane was in no position to say this about others, it appeared that using direct language was not one of Mahiru's strengths. She stammered as she spoke and her voice was rather quiet.

"What about it?"

"...W-When we get out of the bath, you'll do it with me, right…? Is that okay?"

Having heard Mahiru say something so endearing, Amane buried his face into her shoulder, much to Mahiru's surprise. Flustered, she immediately began to hit Amane's arm playfully.

"Wh-What happened to you all of a sudden?" Mahiru asked.

"Don't mind me," Amane continued, " I was just thinking that you shouldn't say such adorable things. Anyway, both of us want to do the same thing, so please prepare yourself once you've left the bath."

"Eh…? Uuu… P-Please pretend that I did not ask that…"

Amane hugged Mahiru gently, knowing that she would undoubtedly be overwhelmed if he were to no longer hold himself back. But, he held on tight, like he never wanted to let her go.

"Don't wanna."

"You're such a meanie."

"Yeah, I'm exactly that—a meanie."

Amane responded with a calm and gentle whisper, and Mahiru, seemingly unable to bear the situation any longer, muttered, "*Baka*," and prodded Amane in the knee, which was by her side, in order to express her dissatisfaction.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

Amane felt that if they stuck to each other like that in the bath any longer he'd lose it, so he decided to call that enough contact for now, and got out of the bath.

Having finished his daily washing routine, Amane then dried his hair in the living room and waited for Mahiru's return.

For a brief moment, Amane considered leaving his hair wet while waiting, aiming to have Mahiru spoil him some more, but he had a looming feeling that she would scold him, so he dried his hair quickly instead.

Amane also thought about waiting for Mahiru in his bedroom, but since that would likely make the atmosphere too intense, he decided to wait in the room where they usually spent time together. It also helped him to hide how fast his heart was beating.

Trying to hide his nervousness, Amane turned on the television. It was then that he heard a noise coming from the hallway. Amane guessed that the sound was Mahiru approaching, but he was too embarrassed to turn around to face her. He pretended to be absorbed in watching the television instead.

After a few moments, Amane finally looked up at her… and he felt instantly relieved at the sight. If Mahiru had returned wearing a risqué nightgown, Amane would've adamantly suspected that she was testing his endurance, but Mahiru was actually dressed in a modest knee-length negligee with a matching cardigan.

The negligee was made of a silky yet glossy fabric that was laced with a sheer material that gave her outfit a tinge of layered transparency. It was designed in such a way that it didn't reveal the true curves of her body, however, so it didn't look indecent.

The negligee itself was suspended by straps and had no sleeves, but since Mahiru had worn a laced cardigan over it, it wasn't as revealing as one might expect. Instead, it simply helped embellish Mahiru's prim and proper attitude.

Embarrassed by Amane's stare, Mahiru shrunk back a bit shyly, but she didn't try to hide herself. Instead, she steadily returned his gaze, looking in his direction as if peeking at him.

"D-Does it look strange on me?"

"Not one bit. Those clothes are cute and suit you rather well. I was just thinking that they're different from the ones you wore back at my parents' house."

“O-Of course I can’t wear these clothes at your parents’ house. Erm, but right now you’re the only one seeing me, Amane-kun, so I am trying my best.”

Mahiru fidgeted as she spoke and sat down next to Amane politely. Then, she leaned to the side, and rested her body on him.

The sensation of thin fabric paired with the fresh, sweet, yet not overpowering aroma—one slightly stronger than the one he had experienced in the bath—caused Amane to tense up, despite him trying to calm himself down moments before.

Amane felt that way simply from being next to her. If he were to hug Mahiru now, he would undoubtedly lose himself to her charming scent.

“Frankly, I was worried about what I’d do if you came in wearing some indecent-looking nightwear.”

“Actually, I had thought about that,” she confirmed.

“Listen here…”

“But, erm… I-I thought that if I was too… aggressive in what I wore, I might overwhelm you,” Mahiru cleared up, “In fact, I’m sure of it.” The sight of her muttering shyly was, frankly, adorable. If there was even a single man willing to back down after seeing such a spectacle, they’d warrant a trip to the nearest eye doctor.

“...I wouldn’t be put off by that,” Amane confirmed. “I’d be happy to see you wearing it for my sake, Mahiru.”

“I–I still won’t wear it, okay?”

“So you won’t, huh?”

“Do you want me to wear it?”

“Well, yeah. Someday, well… I think I’ll want you to wear it. If you ever feel like the time is right, Mahiru, go ahead and show it to me.”

“...*Someday*, okay?”

“Yeah, someday. …For now, you don’t need to overdo it.”

While seeing Mahiru writhe in embarrassment would be a cute sight to behold, there was no need to force her to wear those clothes when she hesitated to do so. For Amane, waiting until Mahiru chose to wear it because she wanted to was of utmost importance.

Amane then tried to drop the subject, but tilted his head at Mahiru, as he noticed that she seemed to want to say something more. But in response to his quizzical look, she pouted, saying sharply, “It’s nothing.” Amane then gently took her hand without pushing the matter any further.

Although Amane simply held her hand as he usually did, he could feel Mahiru's body stiffen briefly. But once Amane moved to lovingly wrap his arms around her in silence, her tension melted away, and she rested her head on his arm. Mahiru snuggled up to Amane, not at all forcefully, but as if to say she'd never let go. Amane in return also slightly leaned on Mahiru.

With perfect timing, the variety show ended, and the monotonous voice of a newscaster flowed from the TV into the living room. Amane listened to the voice half-asleep, unable to fully concentrate on the comforting warmth next to him. He changed the manner in which he held Mahiru's hand.

Until now, he had simply cupped his palm around hers, but now, Amane intertwined their fingers together. He searched for the perfect position to bring her fingers close to his, implying that he would never let them go. Her slender fingers, which had been sufficiently warmed up due to the bath, did not resist Amane's gesture. Mahiru simply gripped back in return, as if responding the same way to him.

"...It's about time. Let's get some sleep."

Mahiru quietly and softly squeezed Amane's hand once more after hearing the words that he said so naturally.

They moved to Amane's bedroom as they continued to hold hands tightly, and Mahiru looked around a little upon entering.

Mahiru had entered Amane's bedroom many times before, so there shouldn't have been anything unfamiliar to her, but given Mahiru's nature, she probably had refrained from scoping out his room the previous times she had been there. Or perhaps, Mahiru was simply letting her mind wander, and was looking around the room to stop thinking about what they would do next.

Although Mahiru kept her true intentions hidden, she turned her gaze to his desk and let out a small smile.

"...You've been taking good care of your stuffed animal, haven't you?"

Saying that, Mahiru pointed to the cat plushie that she had won for him at the arcade during their Golden Week date.

While it may have looked out of place in Amane's room, since Mahiru had worked so hard to win it for him, putting it away would be both a pity and a waste, so Amane decided to leave it on display.

Other people basically never entered his room, so he figured it wouldn't be a big deal, but now that she had pointed it out to him, he was left feeling a little embarrassed.

“Well, just to the point of making sure it doesn’t get dusty. I don’t sleep with it in my arms like you do, Mahiru.”

“A-Are you making fun of me?”

“Why’d you ask? It’s very cute, so there’s no reason to make fun of you. I’m glad that you’re treasuring it.”

Mahiru was extremely fond of the stuffed animal he gave to her on her birthday, and she seemed to be sleeping well with it wrapped in her arms. Chitose, who had occasionally stayed at Mahiru’s house, gave him a detailed report of Mahiru doing so, so it must have been a regular occurence.

Mahiru seemed embarrassed that she was sleeping while hugging a stuffed animal, for her eyes began to dart around the room before suddenly landing back on Amane with a sharp glare, as if blaming him. As soon as Amane complimented her honestly, however, her anger vanished and she simply felt embarrassed.

“...I always take good care of what you give me, Amane-kun.”

“Thanks for that. ...You didn’t bring it with you today, did you? Kuma-san, I mean. Your teddy bear.”

“Erm, that’s because… I have you with me tonight, Amane-kun.”

“...Yeah.”

Whether Mahiru wanted to use him as a body pillow or to become a body pillow, Amane wasn’t going to ask her which one she was imagining. As long as Mahiru would be able to hug to her heart’s content, that was all that mattered. Likewise, Amane intended to hug Mahiru to his heart’s content.

He thought about embracing her right away, but Amane’s eyes gravitated once more towards the cat plushie on display by Mahiru’s side. The toy’s large, yet emotionless round eyes felt like they were staring intently at him, as Amane thought about the ways in which he could draw Mahiru closer.

This situation was reminiscent of a child chancing upon their parents’ intimate moments, and this thought left Amane feeling embarrassed. Strange and unfamiliar, it was a feeling that Amane had never felt before, given that his relationship with Mahiru hadn’t yet developed that far before this point. However, he couldn’t help but feel something like that, despite the strangeness of the sentiment. Without thinking, Amane silently grabbed the blanket that was draped over his chair and used it to cover the stuffed cat.

“...Is something wrong?” Mahiru questioned.

“W-Well, I feel like I can’t relax right now, while it’s watching me… That’s all,” Amane replied.

Even though he knew the stuffed animal could not see them, for an inexplicable reason, Amane couldn't help but think that it would be bad for the thing to be able to see what was going to happen next—or rather, what Amane was likely about to do to Mahiru.

Of course, Amane wasn't intending to escalate things to a point where he'd chip away at his own sanity, but even so, he hesitated to give Mahiru the kind of attention that lovers do, in front of the cat's pure, innocent eyes.

"*Fufu*. You're concerned about it too, aren't you, Amane-kun?"

"Shut up."

"That part of you is rather cute, you know?"

"Is that something you can say when you go to sleep while hugging Kuma-san?"

"I thought we were finished talking about that, right? Geez!"

Amane chuckled and accepted Mahiru, who was upset at the topic being brought up yet again. Evidently, this didn't seem to sit well with her, because she pressed her free hand into Amane's side—although in the gentlest of punches.

Understandably, Amane wasn't in any pain as a result. Conversely, the pleasant tickling sensation it caused to his side only added to the charm of Mahiru's protest.

While Mahiru's cute attempts at a counterattack were efforts to hide her embarrassment, she would only resort to physical retaliation when it came to Amane. He understood that it was only because it was him that she would take revenge by touching like that, so Amane had no intention of resisting it or hating her.

Mahiru continued her gentle punching barrage on Amane's chest for a while, but gave him a slightly resentful look before long, as he was utterly unfazed. Silently, Amane smiled and caught Mahiru's hand, which had been loosely balled into a fist.

That being said, all Amane did next was intertwine their fingers together, which allowed their palms to press against each other.

At this, Mahiru's eyes widened, then her cheeks flushed faintly as she dropped her gaze to the floor. Amane knew that she wasn't against it, so he squeezed her palm gently and escorted her further into the bedroom by the hand.

Mahiru sat down on his bed without any resistance whatsoever, following Amane's lead.

Amane looked at Mahiru, and rather unsurprisingly, despite her cooperation, saw a hint of surprise lingering on her face. Letting go of her hand, Amane sat down next to Mahiru—and hugged her gently, before continuing.

"...Erm, is it okay to pick up where we left off earlier…, in the bathroom?"

"Y-Yes."

Amane has asked her for confirmation, and in return, Mahiru gave him the go-ahead with a touch of awkwardness in her voice.

I don't think she dislikes it, but she's all nervous again now, Amane thought, but he had gone too far already to stop now, so he gently lifted Mahiru's chin and lovingly nibbled her lip.

He wasn't sure whether she'd gotten used to it a little, but at the very least, Mahiru's cheeks hadn't immediately flared up with passion or lust.

What welled up was a joy that sunk in as far as it could go, a love that threatened to drown him, and a euphoria that kindled the warmth in his heart. Amane's urge to envelop Mahiru tenderly and cherish her was stronger than his urge to pounce on her, and slowly, slowly, he pressed his lips against Mahiru's, with utmost care, in an effort to soothe her tension.

They felt as though they were melting into one being, despite them only brushing their lips against each other, and as Amane pecked at her lips to enjoy the smooth sensation, he could hear the faint sound of Mahiru's ticklish giggling.

It was a voice that nobody else could pick up on—a voice that they alone could hear.

Amane wanted to hear more of her voice, so their kisses, which had only been a faint nibble of the lips until now, grew stronger. Deeper and deeper, they kissed, as if seeking out the heat within each other, and their connection grew even stronger. Sharing heat, kissing each other heartily like this was something they hadn't gotten used to, but even so, Mahiru had certainly accepted Amane.

Every time a sweet, muffled voice that sounded like it was stuck in her throat leaked out of the corner of her mouth, Amane felt a rush of arousal that he couldn't even begin to describe.

He was aware that what he was doing was simple, but now that he'd come this far, the fever-like feeling was steadily accumulating, and Amane's momentum was building up as if something was pushing him from behind.

The stiffness of Mahiru's slender body had long since vanished. In fact, she was leaning against Amane's body lightly, as if her strength had been sucked away. Just the thought of her soft limbs touching him through her thin negligee made him hopelessly, dearly, and longingly, reach out his hand to her.

When he touched her hips through the negligee with the hand he had been embracing her with, Mahiru trembled slightly, a reaction that only Amane, who was kissing her, could notice.

Amane gently stroked her hips with his palm, and just from that, Mahiru twitched and wriggled her body slightly. There was no sign of her running away. She simply took in the invasion of Amane's palm.

That fact fueled his inner passion and eagerness above all else.

Amane's palm naturally soared up Mahiru's body, and almost entirely instinctively, she quivered long before Amane reached anything truly sensitive.

Suddenly, Amane realized just what he was about to do. He stopped moving his palm in a hurry and stopped savoring her lips to create some distance between him and Mahiru, but instead, she buried her face in Amane's chest of her own accord. Her face was completely flushed, and she was teary-eyed.

Mahiru's hand, which Amane had thought would push him away, was placed on top of his. It was as if she were telling him not to let go with the gentle pressure of her delicate palm.

"...Erm, I do not intend to retract what I said before… when I asked to stay the night."

The slightly muffled voice emerging from within his chest had certainly spun such words before, but this time, it was Amane who had tensed his body.

His eyes met Mahiru's as she glanced up at him.

Mahiru's face was stained a deep red due to their kisses, and in her expression, he could see that she was begging him to not stop. Her caramel-coloured pupils were so wet, as she nervously observed Amane's next move, that she looked like she would start shedding sweet teardrops at any moment.

Amane swallowed hard without thinking.

Mahiru would probably—no, *definitely*—accept what Amane was about to do. So much so, that even if it meant giving up something precious,

something that Mahiru could only surrender once, Amane believed that she would accept his wishes and gladly offer it to him.

That was just how much she trusted him—how much she loved him.

Even Amane had his pride, though.

Was it truly okay for him to respond to her trust, and her love, by continuing down this path?

Endlessly, all sorts of conflicting thoughts swirled around inside his mind. The desire that was eagerly urging on his body and the desire to love her from the bottom of his heart. Both of these feelings were clashing in his mind, shattering his sanity.

Mahiru shuddered as he exhaled.

She was clearly leaving everything about what would happen next to Amane, so she was feeling anticipation and anxiety thinking about where things could lead.

Women often had no choice but to accept the repercussions of situations like these, as their bodies tended to be small and frail. And, if something were to happen, they would be the ones carrying the burden.

Considering that, Amane's answer was clear.

"Well, you see…"

"Y-Yes?"

"As for how I feel, I want to make you mine, Mahiru."

"...Yes."

As for how long Amane had been waiting for the day to come when he and Mahiru would be united, she likely had no idea.

No matter how much Amane would be teased or laughed at by Itsuki and the others for his decision, he fought to retain his control, even knowing that he naturally had desires of his own, and he'd even dreamed of them before. Ever since they started dating, he'd distracted himself with crude delusions in order to comfort himself, despite the immense guilt he felt while doing it.

Even so, the reason Amane hesitated to extend his hand further was wholly due to him fixing his gaze on the future.

"...But, you know. Erm, I'm not old enough to take responsibility just yet, and if something happened, you would be the one troubled. Well, of course I would take responsibility if something did happen, but it's not like I can promise a legally definite relationship right away."

There was only one way for him to take responsibility.

The only problem was that, in accordance with the law, one could not get married until they were eighteen years of age.

If something were to happen during the *act*, a baby would be born during their times as a student. No matter how much knowledge he gained and how many countermeasures he were to take, it would only reduce the likelihood of conception, not eliminate it.

If that were to happen, it would affect Mahiru's life in the future, and there could be people who would judge her harshly for it. Amane would only be hurting her. In turn, it'd be possible that Mahiru would give up on her own past hopes and dreams for her own life.

There was no way Amane could sacrifice Mahiru's future to satisfy this single momentary impulse.

"It's precisely because I love you, Mahiru, that I want to put you first. In the future, once you find things that you want to do or study, I don't want to interfere with those goals. We will spend a lot of time together from now on, and considering that, I think that your life shouldn't be dictated by the feelings and desires of a single moment right now."

"...I see."

"I am fully prepared to spend the rest of my life with you, Mahiru. It's just that, I…"

"Anything more than this is fine, you know?"

He thought Mahiru had cut him off to call him a coward, but she gave him an innocent smile, like she was troubled and yet blessed with an unexpected happiness.

"I understand that you are very considerate of me, Amane-kun, and that you love me very deeply. To be cherished this much… I'm so, so happy."

Mahiru, who giggled as if she was satisfied from the bottom of her heart, lightly kissed Amane and smiled once more as their faces nearly touched.

"...I love this side of you, Amane-kun… from the bottom of my heart!"

This time, it was Amane who kissed the one dearest to him, a lovely girl whose smiles overflowed with more happiness than anyone else, as he once more wrapped her small body within his arms.

"Could you please wait until I can take responsibility?"

Seemingly aware of Amane's inner conflict, Mahiru lowered her eyes ever so slightly before nodding with a bashful smile and diving deep into Amane's chest.

Mahiru had undoubtedly been greeted by the loud thumping of his heart.

“Then, I shall save myself until the time comes,” Mahiru announced in a voice so gentle and brimming with contentment that anyone would be able to say that she was wholeheartedly overjoyed. Then she looked up a little from Amane’s chest and showed him a smile completely full of happiness.

Amane hugged Mahiru again and whispered, “I’ll make sure to treasure you,” and gently felt the comforting heat and softness of her body.

Of course, Amane had no regrets about his choice. He hadn’t lied about wanting to take good care of her. He was fully prepared to make her happy for the rest of his life.

That said, his body just couldn’t handle it any longer, so he wanted her to cut him a little bit of slack—just this once.

“...Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Can I say something shameful?”

“Please do. As the one that I love, I shall accept your cool side, your shameful side, and your every request.”

Though he was subtly flustered by Mahiru’s tolerant attitude, Amane kissed her on the nape of her neck, steeled himself, and began speaking.

“...Well, you see... Can I touch you? …Just a little.”

He had no intention of wasting his resolve. There was no way he would break his vow.

He just wanted her to let him slightly alleviate the desires that were swarming inside his head.

Mahiru seemingly did not expect Amane’s request, and her eyes blinked and flickered greatly, before she blushed a clear red.

However, it wasn’t the color of rejection, but of approval, and after looking up at Amane in embarrassment, she kept her eyes downcast.

“...P-Please, be gentle with me.”

Perhaps it was foolish of him to think that there was even a faint hint of anticipation in her whispering voice. Nevertheless, Amane bit down his joy at her acceptance, gently took Mahiru’s hand and dropped his body down onto the bed.

Chapter 2

A Strong Determination to Cherish

Amane had fallen asleep cuddling Mahiru last night, but when he woke up the next morning, she was no longer in his arms.

He looked around slowly, lifting his heavy eyelids, and the only trace of Mahiru's presence was the empty space next to him... Or so Amane thought for a moment, until he noticed something strange. For some reason, there was a stuffed cat placed at the edge of the bed, looking his way.

The stuffed animal, which Amane had covered with his blanket the night before, was now positioned next to him, perhaps because of a certain someone's handiwork. Its round, wide eyes were as imposing as usual.

Amane saw a reflection of himself in those eyes and noticed that he looked fairly refreshed. But suddenly, he remembered what had happened the night before, and a wave of awkwardness and embarrassment bombarded him. He then turned the toy's face toward the wall.

...She was so adorable.

In line with his promise and Mahiru's wish, Amane had only allowed himself to touch her gently. However, despite that, it still must've been rather stimulating for Mahiru, for she showed him a side of herself that he didn't even know she had.

Her frail, high-pitched voice that echoed through the house, the sweat that trickled across her flushed skin, the soft sensation of touching that skin, so different from his own, her eyes that melted with sweet trust and anticipation—everything had been vividly etched deep into Amane's mind, sweetly testing his sanity. Even now.

In hindsight, he couldn't help but feel like he wasn't in his right mind last night, but at the very least, Amane could guarantee that he hadn't broken his promise with anything he did afterward. However, it was also true that he had brought her right to the edge.

Amane's head began to ache just from recalling what had happened, the

embarrassment of the memory hitting him. He tried to push it all into the back of his mind, but as he stood up, he heard the sound of the door creaking.

"...Have you woken up?"

Mahiru poked her head out from the gap in the door, and if the apron she was wearing was any indication, she had been preparing their breakfast. Mahiru had gotten changed first and was wearing casual clothes beneath the apron.

It was only natural that she would change, given that her negligee had become all wrinkled, but Amane couldn't deny that he would've liked to see her dressed in it for a little while longer. Though since he'd stared at it so much already the night before, he couldn't really complain. Mustering up a somewhat hoarse voice, he replied, "Good morning."

Mahiru blushed for a moment as she locked eyes with him, but she didn't run away. "Breakfast is ready, so please get yourself changed and wash your face."

"...I will." That line of hers made his heart flutter, making it sound as if they were already living together in the truest sense of the phrase. However, since she actually came to his house every day, until right before she went to sleep, they were obviously already halfway there.

"What's for breakfast today?"

"We're having rice with *dashimaki tamago* and miso soup, pre-made *kinpira gobou*, and cold tofu with frozen salmon." [1]

"What a luxurious breakfast first thing in the morning. ...It's like I'm dreaming."

"Isn't that a bit of an exaggeration? If you're just feeling sleepy, I can help wake you up." Mahiru entered his room from the hallway and pinched his cheeks, once she made her way over to him. Though, it was probably more accurate to say that she had come for the contact rather than to wake him up, since it didn't hurt at all.

Mahiru seemed satisfied by squishing his cheeks, and Amane felt a sense of warmth and happiness well up from within him, as if a patch of sunlight was shining onto his chest. He reached out and gently ran his hand along the nape of her neck, lightly pinching her collar and lifting it up.

Around the base of her neck where Amane touched her, there was a small red mark, reminiscent of a camellia that had fallen onto the glistening snow, which was neatly hidden by her clothes just a moment ago.

It was a faint, inconspicuous sight that would be hidden by her school uniform, but to the person who was responsible for it, it was a fairly exciting thing to see.

Only the two of them knew the secret that lay hidden beneath just one layer of clothing.

"...We'll have to keep that hidden for a while."

"Th-This is your fault in the first place though, Amane-kun."

"I really am sorry about that." He promptly apologized. "…I couldn't control myself…"

Rationally, Amane knew that Mahiru would be troubled if he'd made a mark somewhere people would be able to see, but the devil perched on Amane's shoulder at the time wanted nothing more than to trample all over the fresh snow that was the Angel's skin, and as a result, he'd unconsciously brought his lips to bear on the landscape of her flawless neck.

Mahiru quickly adjusted her clothes, falling silent as her face turned redder than even the mark itself. If Amane were to remind her too much about last night, she would definitely give him the silent treatment for a while. She was undeniably the one who revealed more of her private self, but Amane wasn't about to press the issue, lest he'd be forced to skip breakfast. Besides, Amane being Amane, even a freezing cold shower wouldn't be enough to cool himself down after recalling last night's events.

"A-Anyway, please hurry up and get changed. You can cool your head down by washing your face," Mahiru advised despite her embarrassment.

"...I think you're the one who'd be better off cooling down, though."

"Did you say something?"

"No, I said nothing at all…."

Amane pouted mildly as Mahiru glared at him slightly, her cheeks clearly hotter than his own, and then he grabbed the end of the shirt he was wearing, signaling that he was about to get changed.

Mahiru immediately let out a pitiful "*Hyah!*" and scurried out of his room at top speed. Amane couldn't help but chuckle at this, thinking about the contrast in her behavior.

She was so curious last night, though.

Red from head to toe, Mahiru clumsily made her hasty retreat. She was so embarrassed that it was hard to believe she was the very same lover he'd shared so many experiences with behind closed doors. Amane then changed

into his casual clothes, his shoulders trembling with chuckling laughter all the while.

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Amane had finished the breakfast Mahiru had made for him and took a breather on the sofa, but there was something strange about the way she was sitting next to him.

Normally, they'd settle with a distance where they would be close enough to touch each other without snuggling, but today there was a bit more distance between them, and Mahiru was acting awkward. Whenever he tried to hold her hand, her body would shake with a twitch like a small, frightened animal, to the point that Amane was even starting to feel a little guilty.

"...Uh, I feel like there's a tremendous amount of distance between us."

"N-No, erm, it cannot be helped. It's all your fault, Amane-kun. After all, you touched me so much last night... well, of course I wouldn't be able to keep my mind off of it today."

While they were eating, they had treated each other normally, albeit a little awkwardly. But now that they were simply sitting next to each other again, she grew self-conscious, seemingly remembering everything they'd done the night before. Fortunately for Amane, there were no signs of Mahiru being displeased with him at all, though her cheeks were flushed and eyes downcast.

"Well, erm, I'll admit that it's my fault," Amane replied, hesitant. "Did you… not like it?"

"I-I didn't say no, and I accepted it, so... I-I am happy. But th-that's not what I meant. It's just embarrassing, and when we sit together like this I get reminded of it all and I get embarrassed."

"I… see. ...It's not like it doesn't embarrass me too, but... more than that, I just want to be with you more."

Of course, Amane would be lying if he said he wasn't embarrassed at all.

The more he thought about it, the more embarrassed he felt about the secrets he shared with her, and the more he wanted to agonize over the fact that he did things he would normally consider unimaginable. But, even so, when he thought about it, the warmth, the sensation, everything came back to him, and it made him *want* Mahiru all over again.

In light of that, the reason Amane remained relatively calm was probably because the promise he'd made last night was wholly buried deep in his heart, and that fact alone served as the dam that restrained his overflowing feelings.

"I-It sounds like I'm the only one feeling embarrassed about it if you say that. Geez."

"...So, we can't snuggle?"

"I never said you couldn't," Mahiru answered. Then while quietly murmuring, "That's so unfair, though," she closed the distance she'd created up until now and sat close enough for them to touch once more.

Mahiru's fragrance wafted through the air as she sidled over, and mixed in with her usual scent was the softener that Amane tended to use, which made him feel a different kind of embarrassed.

...It's nice to smell your own scent from your lover.

Perhaps he just hadn't really noticed, but she'd been wearing Amane's scent for a while now. Staying the night like this, he was reminded once again that it was becoming natural for Mahiru to slowly but surely warm up to him and want to stay by his side, and the thought warmed his heart.

The fact that Amane's only wish was for him to connect with her even more made him keenly aware that he was utterly charmed by Mahiru.

"...Erm, come to think of it, Shihoko-san and Shuuto-san are at a hotel right now, aren't they?"

A timid Mahiru asked softly as Amane gripped her hand. He smiled at the gentle warmth and comfort it gave him.

"Hm? Yeah, that's right. They said they'll be coming again this afternoon. The timing of it feels odd, though. It scares me."

Shihoko and Shuuto had gone out of their way to reserve a hotel for the duration of their stay despite Amane's apartment being a viable and convenient option for the two of them.

If the two of them had stayed at his apartment, last night's events with Mahiru wouldn't have happened, so it wasn't a bad thing for Amane in the end, but he had all sorts of mixed feelings about how things had played out.

"By the way… Ah—" Amane suddenly remembered something. "…It'd be embarrassing if you told them what we did, so please play dumb."

"Y-Yes."

“I’m afraid that they’ll see right through us, and that’d only make the misunderstandings worse… I’d prefer it if Mom didn’t go overboard, so please don’t say anything carelessly.”

“I-I won’t, okay?”

“I don’t know about that, Mahiru. Lately, you’ve been holding back a lot less of your inner thoughts out there in public. Even if you try to hide it, she might see right through you and get excited all on her own, you know?”

After they had started dating, Mahiru, who gradually showed more of her true self at school, had begun to smile and express her emotions more naturally than ever. It wasn’t as if she was wearing her emotions on her sleeve, but she had become extremely easy to read for the people close to her.

All the more so if the person in question was Shihoko. Mahiru had completely opened up to her and they were rather close in general, but their close-knit relationship could backfire on her this time.

Shihoko was so excited about Mahiru coming into Amane’s life that she was watching them like a hawk. It was within the realm of possibility that she’d notice that something transpired and brazenly point it out, causing Mahiru to reveal everything. Amane would prefer for her to keep her guard up.

“Geez, Amane-kun. I don’t think you should be talking about your mother like that…”

“It’s a fact that she tends to go overboard a lot, though.”

“...While I can’t deny that, she’s still a kind and considerate person.”

“That’s a different story. I don’t like how Mom smirks at me.”

Even Shihoko’s future daughter couldn’t deny her tendency to go overboard, but Amane did understand Mahiru’s point of view. He loved Shihoko both as a person and as his mother, but he couldn’t deny the high chance of her getting carried away, prying or meddling, and he wasn’t good at dealing with any of those outcomes.

“I know. ...E-Eerm, right now, I don’t want to… tell anyone just yet, either.”

“...Yeah.”

It was clear as day that Mahiru had no intention of telling even Chitose, and her eyes were welling up with embarrassment. Her cheeks were faintly red, her words yet again reminding her of last night. Her eyes darted around as if she couldn’t bear to even look at him.

Even so, the fact that she refused to let go let him feel the strength of Mahiru's love.

"...Shihoko-san and Shuuto-san are coming this afternoon, right?"

"Yeah, that's what I heard... What's wrong?"

Amane tilted his head slightly, subtly asking her if there was a problem with the arrangement, but his chest throbbed slightly as Mahiru turned towards him with feverish eyes.

"N-No, erm, I-I was just hoping that it could just be the two of us for a little while longer."

Amane's face relaxed as she continued to say such cute things. He teased her a little, replying, "It's just the two of us every day, isn't it?"

"Th-That's true, but... Eerm, t-today is… special."

Today was the day Mahiru had accepted Amane from the bottom of her heart. They had shared their warmth together, and committed even more to one another. This *special* day that Mahiru mentioned, was also special for Amane in the same way.

"...You're right. Let's take it easy until they arrive."

"Yes."

That said, it was still embarrassing to think about that *special* moment once more. Amane smiled slightly, gently took Mahiru's hand, and submerged himself in her warmth once again.

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"*Mahiru-chaaan!* I haven't seen you since the cultural festival!"

Amane and Mahiru had finished lunch and were taking a breather, when Shihoko and Shuuto showed up, in the same lively fashion as always.

Even though they had seen each other just yesterday, Shihoko was clinging to Mahiru as if it had been years since the last time they had gotten together. Seeing this, Amane couldn't help but narrow his eyes, wondering what on Earth she was doing.

"It's only been a day. Why're you acting like it's been so long?"

"Ara, I was away from my cute daughter for a whole day. Of course I'd be lonely."

"It's only been a little over a month since we last got together, hasn't it?"

More than a month had passed since the last time they had gotten together, or more accurately, the time before that. Amane was referring to the final day of their stay over at his parents' house. He could understand Shihoko being as happy as she was when they reunited at the cultural festival, but was stumped as to why she had the very same enthusiasm a single day after.

Shuuto calmly watched over Shihoko, even while she acted so excited, seemingly having no intention of stopping her from clinging to Mahiru.

"Don't sweat the small stuff. I miss what I miss."

"Mahiru, don't be afraid to push her away if she gets annoying."

"Geez, Amane-kun. I-I am happy about it…"

As a matter of fact, Mahiru seemed to like being fussed over by Shihoko, so she wasn't lying in the slightest. However, she was often overwhelmed by his mother's momentum, and he could see her flinching each time Shihoko burst out with some new explosive exclamation of love for her.

Naturally, Amane understood that Mahiru was accepting Shihoko because she liked her, and that she was pleased about it, but... As her boyfriend, the fact that his mother had more affectionate contact with Mahiru than Amane, her lover, was something that left him feeling worried.

His mother seemed dissatisfied with Amane's exasperated comments, and even though he was her son, her youthful face combined with her puffing out her cheeks made her look far younger than she was, in his eyes.

Amane was aware that she was acting like that on purpose, but as her own son, he wanted her to calm down a little more. He'd probably end up writhing in agony if she acted like that in public, not to mention embarrassed. Shihoko pressed on, however. "Seriously, Amane, you should learn from Mahiru-chan's cuteness."

"You'd be put off if I did that, right?"

"Well, perhaps, but in the past, you were as adorable as an angel... Now you're aloof and not cute at all."

"I humbly apologize for not being cute."

"Oh my, are you sulking? You're so cute when you're like that."

"Stop with the weird interpretations!"

"Oh my... I gave you a compliment and that's what I get!"

"Now, now," Shuuto finally stepped in. "Amane's at the age where he'd get mixed feelings if he was complimented too much by his mother for being cute. He has his pride as a man, after all."

“Ara~ You’re so cute when you do that too, Amane. Look at you getting all embarrassed like that.”

“Can I get angry now?” Since Shuuto’s support wasn’t exactly supportive, Amane glared at the overly friendly couple while trying to keep his eye from twitching, but it was then that Mahiru decided to mediate.

It seemed that she didn’t want them to fight, but Amane obviously wasn’t seriously annoyed, nor did he want to get into an actual argument. That aside, he was clearly irritated at least slightly by Shihoko’s teasing tone.
“A-Amane-kun, calm down,” Mahiru said, trying to break them apart.

“I *am* calm. It’s just that a certain someone won’t get off my case.”

“Ara, I don’t know about that, Amane. To begin with, you mustn’t blame others.”

“Look who’s talking.”

“Hey, that’s enough. Shihoko, if you don’t pipe down soon, Amane will give you the silent treatment. And Amane, you know that Shihoko-san wants to fuss over you, right? Don’t give her openings by responding emotionally.”

“...Okayyy.”

His father would almost always enter as a neutral mediator at times like this, and he was the only one who could quiet Shihoko down.

Shuuto understood that both Amane and his mother weren’t serious, but after discerning that they’d be in for the long game if their quarrel continued any longer, Shuuto had come to stop them. If left to their own devices, they could end up wasting a lot of the day with further arguing.

So, Amane and Shihoko obediently settled down once Shuuto interjected, and he began to expand on what he had said.

“We specially took some time off to come all the way here, so we want to take it easy and spend as much time with each other as we can, don’t we?”

The gentleness of Shuuto’s smile as he patted Shihoko on the back and grinned at Amane was enough to make anyone lose their anger, so Amane dropped his arms and apologized, saying, “I’m sorry I got worked up over something so small,” and Shihoko responded with “Sorry for teasing you too much,” in a meek voice.

They both knew there was no point in continuing to argue, and they were thorough in apologizing to each other and burying the hatchet, much like they had done back at his parents’ house.

Be that as it may, despite knowing it wouldn’t be mature of him, Amane took Mahiru back from his mother’s hand. He pulled her towards him in a

small act of retaliation, and while Shihoko looked dissatisfied, Mahiru didn't seem too upset, as she quickly smiled.

If anything, it seemed she was happy about it. And if it made Mahiru happy, then what he'd done was probably okay.

"...Actually, I'm surprised both of you managed to get a few days off together," Amane said.

As for Amane, it was surprising to him that the two of them, Shuuto and Shihoko, who were both working adults and were quite busy, were able to match their schedules to come for a visit.

Even with their workplaces being relatively lenient with taking time off, even being supportive of parenting and employees participating in their child's school events, Amane wasn't a child anymore. Taking time off for a cultural festival seemed unusual to him.

"Well in my case, I finished my work much earlier than the deadline they gave me. Luckily, Shuuto-san was also able to take some time off."

"You didn't have to go out of your way to come all the way out here, Mom. You could've just taken it easy together at home."

"Ara, you mean you didn't want me to see your cultural festival?"

"That's not what I meant. I'm just saying that it's quite the distance to travel. Wouldn't it be better for a married couple to spend their time together instead?"

Truth be told, when Mahiru came with Amane to his parents' home, they were both quite busy. They worked hard for their income, though his parents didn't let it show during their stay.

Amane felt bad about letting them spend their precious time off to attend their son's cultural festival as going out of their way to get here by car took time and energy. But even with that, his parents would only be able to see the cultural festival for less than half a day, if that.

Since that was the case, he wanted them to use that time to rest and alleviate their inevitable fatigue, but Shihoko laughed off Amane's half-concerned, half-considerate words with a mischievous smile.

"You're such a dummy, Amane," she said. "Shuuto-san and I are always together at home. You're participating in a cultural festival, which only happens once, so of course we'd prioritize that over anything else. It's fine if we take the opportunity to come meet our son and daughter, right?"

"...If you say so."

Instead of pointing out how Mahiru was being treated completely like her daughter, Amane had to concentrate on hiding his embarrassment at being cherished. As a result, he unintentionally spoke in a sharp and sulky tone. However, Shihoko chuckled at his reaction before continuing.

“However, I thought it’d be bad to intrude on our newly-wed couple here, so we chose to stay at a hotel in the end.”

“Shut up. That’s none of your business.”

Though it was thanks to their consideration to stay at a hotel that last night’s events occurred, there was no way Amane could say that.

“...Oh my. Goodness me.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. Still, it sure is nice to stay at a hotel once in a while! I was right to splurge a little.”

“That’s right,” Shuuto added in agreement. “This area is more prosperous than where we live, and the nightscape was beautiful to boot.”

Shihoko seemed to have something else to say, but Amane gave her a sharp look. Now it looked like his mother didn’t want to press the matter any longer, and she allowed the subject to be changed, all the while smiling at Shuuto.

Shuuto himself must have picked up on that, too, since he hadn’t needed to chide her. He simply nodded as he talked about the hotel’s reception, the scenery viewed from the window, and the state of developments nearby.

Since the two of them were having fun, there was nothing else for him to add, so even Amane dropped the topic. But as if she had suddenly remembered something, Shihoko turned to look at him.

“Looks like you two spent the night together yesterday. You two really are close~”

Barely holding back a cough, Amane glanced at Mahiru, who in turn shook her head vigorously.

Of course, Amane hadn’t thought that Mahiru leaked their circumstances by accident. The four of them had started talking right after his parents had come over, so he knew there wasn’t any time to mention that she stayed over in the first place.

But for that very reason, Amane couldn’t for the life of him understand how Shihoko had figured it all out. He couldn’t help but grimace. He’d told Mahiru that she was easy to read, but it was all hopeless if he himself had a

look of confirmation written all over his face when called out. Shihoko, however, didn't seem to pay attention to their reactions at all.

"I caught a glimpse of the contents of Mahiru-chan's bag over there, so I figured I ought to ask about it, but it seems I was right after all~"

Hearing that, Amane followed Shihoko's gaze and saw the various skincare sets she had brought to the bathroom yesterday along the side of the sofa.

Should he be angry at her for tricking him? Or should he be afraid that she found out Mahiru came to stay the night just from seeing her bag?

Although his frown deepened, if Amane wasn't careful about his attitude, things could get much worse, and he couldn't help but acknowledge that there was no way for him to talk his way out of it. Keeping his tone from being too petulant as he spoke, Amane responded.

"Shut up, something wrong with that?"

Shihoko smiled elegantly and pleasantly in response. "No? You're old enough and you'd be annoyed if I went on too much about it. You're probably as devoted and sincere as Shuuto-san anyway, so there's no real need for me to worry."

"Considering that, you seem to be joking around a lot, Shihoko-san," Shuuto interjected.

"Hehe, please forgive me for that. He's our adorable son, after all."

Shihoko flashed a confident smile. Although Amane wanted to resist, he gave up and sighed, aware that there was surely no way he could win now. His mother smiled as she usually did, but after grinning at Amane for a while, she then turned to look at Mahiru.

"Oh, by the way, Amane. May I go on an outing with Mahiru-chan?"

Although Shihoko was looking at Mahiru, she was asking him. Frowning at this discrepancy, Amane narrowed his eyes, wondering what was going on all of the sudden.

"Don't ask me. Just ask Mahiru."

"Of course I'll ask her, but I feel like you'd say no because of your strong sense of possessiveness."

"Listen. I admit that I can be possessive, but I have no intention of restricting Mahiru's actions. She's my girlfriend, yes, but in the end she's her own person. I don't intend to force my personal opinions or actions on her."

Just because they were dating didn't mean that Amane had the right to restrict anything Mahiru wanted to do. He may offer his opinion on the matter, but he would never force it onto her, nor would he truly want to.

No matter how close they were, or how much he considered her a beloved partner, she was a separate person with a separate personality. It would be strange if Amane tried to control her like Shihoko was trying to suggest.

Therefore, if Mahiru chose to go out with Shihoko, then that choice was one to be respected. The only thing Amane could do was to ask Mahiru to not say anything strange or leak any of their secrets.

He glared lightly at Shihoko, as if to say that his line of thinking was only natural, but Shihoko happily accepted his exasperated gaze. "Hehe, isn't that great, Mahiru-chan? It's times like this where you can really see his honesty and sincerity."

"Y-Yes."

"I don't feel like I'm being complimented when you're saying it, Mom." Amane interrupted.

"Geez, I wish you'd just honestly accept it. Right, Shuuto-san?"

"You're right."

"Even you, Dad…" Amane avoided accepting Shihoko's praise directly, as it sounded like she was teasing him, but when Shuuto did so, he instead felt a strange sense of unease.

Fundamentally, Shuuto wasn't the type to flatter people, and instead tended to point out people's shortcomings as they were. This made Amane all the more uncomfortable, as he knew Shuuto's praise came from the heart.

As such, when praised so earnestly and directly, it would be too embarrassing for Amane to bear. It would be wrong to say that Shuuto didn't understand Amane's feelings. Rather, he knew them all too well, and dared to praise him intentionally.

"In reality, you're kind and sincere to people you've let into your heart. You may not be the most honest with your words or attitude, but at heart you're a considerate kid, and those who know your true self also know that it's how you conceal your embarrassment."

"Wh-What's with all the sudden compliments…? Stop it."

"I'm having precious time with my child, who I rarely see. It's fine to praise you a little, right?"

"That's enough!"

His mother said everything with a bright smile on her face, devoid of any hint of malice or ill intentions, so Amane couldn't bring himself to get angry. All he wanted was to hide the growing blush on his cheeks, which irked him.

He turned away, not wanting his suddenly heated face to be seen, but a classy laugh akin to the tinkling of bells tickled his ears, coming from Shihoko. "Our Amane's weak against Shuuto-san, isn't he? Nobody else is as skillful at softening Amane's blunt nature."

"I think so too," Mahiru chimed in.

"He usually acts so composed, but when it comes to things like this I realize he's still a child," Shihoko clarified.

"Isn't that part of what makes him cute, though?"

"Fufu, you're right."

"Hey, you guys." Amane suddenly piped up, and glared at his parents and girlfriend, who—since none of them were the one being discussed—had the leeway to watch passively without consequence. Now choosing to feign ignorance, Shihoko nonchalantly smiled at Mahiru.

"Ah. It's a little late to be asking this, but could I invite you out, Mahiru-chan? I'm sorry to intrude on your day off, but without an opportunity like this, I won't be able to wander around the local area with you."

"Yes, I would love to accompany you, Shihoko-san."

"Then it's decided!"

Dissatisfied, Amane had been glaring at them reproachfully. He wasn't fond of the fact that they'd gotten excited about him all on their own, but after ignoring his discontent, Mahiru and Shihoko had promptly decided to go outside together. With this, Amane felt that he ought to have the chance to complain, even just a little.

It was their decision whether they wanted to go out or not, but that aside, he had a lot of bones to pick about their appraisal of him. "Could you not ignore me and let me join in the conversation?"

"Ara. You want to join us on our girls' day out?"

"That's not really necessary, but... whatever."

No matter what he would say now, it would have no effect whatsoever, so Amane heaved a large sigh, a declaration of his discontent, before looking at his father.

"If those two are going out, what're you gonna do, Dad?"

“About that…” his mother interrupted. “Shuuto-san wants to have a talk with you, Amane.”

“...A talk?”

Amane inferred from her comment that it would be related to Mahiru in one way or another, but he failed to imagine what his father would actually say to him. Amane nervously looked over to him, only to be greeted with a gentle smile.

Shuuto usually sported a gentle expression on his face, and Amane generally had trouble figuring out what he was thinking, making him wary. Given his personality, there was no risk of his father forcing any unreasonable demands onto him, so while Amane wasn’t worried about that in the slightest, it made it all the more of a mystery what his father wanted to discuss with him.

“I figured a talk between the two of us would be good once in a while. You know, you always snap back when Shihoko-san’s around, after all. It’s not civil at all,” Shuuto explained.

“I wonder whose fault that is.”

“It’s Amane’s fault for worrying too much about the details. Right?” Shihoko tilted her head slightly, seeking agreement from Mahiru, but Mahiru only showed a faint, troubled smile on her face in response.

I guess Mahiru understands that Mom’s saying weird things just to get a reaction out of me.

Mahiru was wearing an ambiguous smile that appeared to be more benign than strained, to which Amane told her in his mind, *You can be honest with what you want to say*.

“At the very least, Mahiru doesn’t seem to agree.”

“Oh, hush. Well, that’s fine, I have a lot of things I want to talk about with Mahiru-chan myself.”

“Just don’t teach her anything unnecessary.”

“You don’t trust me, do you? No need to worry, I can tell right from wrong. I won’t do anything you would truly dislike. We’ll just have a normal girls’ talk.”

Amane was powerless against the pressure hidden beneath his mother’s smile, and he looked over at Mahiru for some measure of assurance, but all she gave him was a confident smile, signaling, *It’ll be okay*, but Amane didn’t know whether he could trust her or not when it came to his mother’s shenanigans.

“Okay, Mahiru-chan. Let’s go.”

“Ah, w-wait! Please let me go home and get ready first.”

Well, Amane trusted that even Shihoko would avoid prying for details that Mahiru didn’t want to talk about. Probably. So, he watched the two of them leave the house, hand in hand taking cheerful steps.

And so, Amane and Shuuto were left behind. Amane instantly felt relieved that the room had quieted down considerably. As a parent, Shihoko was dear to him and he loved her, but the point stood that he struggled to keep up with the difference in their energy levels, which in the case of his mother, could also be irritating at times. That was why he usually felt a sense of relief right after being liberated from her.

“...She’s like a storm or something. For better or worse, it always gets rowdy when Mom comes over. It’s not usually so lively here.”

Shihoko, who was always cheerful and spreading smiles to everyone around her, was both the moodmaker of the Fujimiya family and a popular person in their neighborhood in general. Always seen smiling and was talkative with others, she was regarded as incredibly social. She was good-natured, but at the same time, she knew when to cleanly cut ties with someone.

Even as her son, Amane realized that she was a person who easily earned the acceptance of others. Outside or inside, her disposition was always the same, so even at home she always acted as her usual lively self.

“Do you two not usually talk much? You and Shiina-san.”

“It’s not that we don’t talk. We’re just not as energetic as Mom.”

Amane and Mahiru were people who preferred to have peaceful conversations, neither of them being the talkative type to begin with. There were countless times where they’d simply stayed by each other’s sides without saying a word, so there wasn’t any chance for any lively, Shihoko-like conversations to occur.

“Haha, you and Shiina-san are usually so relaxed, after all,” Shuuto chuckled.

“More like Mom’s not capable of calming down.”

“Hey, don’t say that. Shihoko-san is surprisingly quiet at home, you know? It’s just that you haven’t seen her like that often.”

“Whaaat? I can’t imagine Mom ever managing to keep quiet.”

Shihoko had been a lively person for as long as Amane could remember. She was always wearing a carefree smile while joking around; she brightly

warmed up the mood wherever she went, shining like the sun. Her words and actions were never lacking in kindness. At the very least, Amane had actually been saved many times by her cheerfulness.

Up until now, he had come to view his mother as a formidable person who wouldn't be herself if she wasn't talking, and Amane could not imagine her ever keeping quiet.

"Fufu. I'm sure Shihoko-san looks like a lively person to you, Amane."

"How does she look to you, Dad?"

"Let's see. To me, she looks like a lonely person who wants to be pampered. Ever since you went back, she's been saying 'I'm lonely, I'm so lonely!' the whole time."

"Really? Even though she doesn't show it?"

There had been times when his mother had laughed and joked that she had been lonely, but Amane had never once thought that she genuinely felt that way.

When Amane had decided to attend his current high school, Shihoko firmly respected his wishes, seeing him off with a smile. She showed no signs of stopping him, or wanting to. So, Shuuto describing his mother as a lonely person was a far cry from Amane's view of her.

Slightly troubled, Shuuto lowered his eyebrows and smiled, seemingly having noticed the look of surprise on Amane's face.

"Shihoko-san is a sensible adult, so she knows that she has to let go of her child. If she shows you how she doesn't want to be separated from you, wouldn't you start to get worried? You've since decided on your own path, and she knows that stopping you only because of her own feelings and circumstances is no good. She's trying to keep it to herself."

"...That's something you shouldn't have told me, right?"

"Exactly. Keep it a secret, okay?"

Shuuto smiled at him with a hint of playfulness, and Amane frowned ever so slightly after being struck with an indescribable feeling caused by the situation. Seeing this, Shuuto looked at him gently.

"It's nothing you need to worry about, Amane. For Shihoko-san and I, the best thing that could happen is for you to live a healthy and happy life. As your parents, knowing that you're living the way you want to really is our greatest happiness."

"...Yeah. I'm a fortunate person, I really am."

"That's good to hear. I'm glad to have a son like you."

Shuuto smiled at his son with his immaculately pure eyes, and Amane accepted this obediently.

Though Amane's embarrassment was rising, he was also still at ease, able to think of it as pleasant. He realized that he was able to experience this complex feeling thanks to the mellowing of his personality with the passing of time, no doubt influenced by the people he surrounded himself with. Amane wasn't confident that his past, twisted self would have been able to sincerely take in his father's words.

"So," Shuuto then moved the topic along. "There's something else I've been meaning to talk to you about."

"...Something else?"

Amane tilted his head, his memory jogged by Shuuto's words. He recalled that his father had stayed behind with the intention of discussing something with him, as Shuuto's expression shifted to a gentle, yet hard to read smile.

"Yeah. I can easily tell just by looking at you two, but you really do get along well with Shiina-san."

"That's… well, yeah. It's true that we're dating, but I think we're pretty close."

Rather than teasing, it was a voice that sounded impressed and relieved, so Amane responded by softening his tone. He was aware that his father wasn't the type to delve too deep into the state of their relationship, but he still couldn't help but brace himself when asked about it.

However, contrary to what Amane expected, Shuuto didn't pry. Instead, he smiled happily, saying, "It's great that you two are getting along so well." And hearing this, Amane's worries dissipated.

"...Dad, you're really not going to ask anything, huh."

"You're the one who'd get embarrassed if you were asked about it, Amane. You'd probably start sulking or something."

"Shut up."

Embarrassed that he had been completely seen through, Amane looked away, his father's laughter reverberating in his ears. "Besides, by the looks of things, it doesn't seem like you've done anything," Shuuto continued.

Amane coughed violently in response to his father's convinced tone.

In a way, he can be worse than mom, Amane thought while almost choking, and as he looked at Shuuto while catching his breath, he was met with his father's usual smile.

“Well, it’s not really my place to say anything, is it? Knowing you, I’m sure you’ve decided how to proceed after careful thought. It’s one of the good things about you, but it’s also a downside.”

“...Considering the future, this is the right thing to do.”

“My son, you’ve become quite the rationalist despite only being a high school student. That said, I do understand that you’re head over heels for her.”

“...I can’t help it.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that.” Shuuto laughed for a while, “I was the same, after all,” before suddenly dropping his smile and looking at Amane firmly. “...Anyway, as for the main issue.”

“Hm?”

“Don’t worry about the cost, okay?”

In the face of such bold words, Amane froze.

Both Amane and Mahiru knew that they would marry in the future. That was why Amane made the choice of taking such intentional care of Mahiru’s body for the future, refraining from crossing any irreversible divides with their bodies in the present. Last night was the strongest example yet, proof of their commitment to that agreement.

From that point on, the practical problems: the cost aspect, and the approval from Mahiru’s parents, were all issues Amane was thinking about, but not discussing with her.

When marrying, it was obvious that the question of money would arise. Considering what to do about the ceremony, residence, income, and so on. Once Amane thought about what would happen after marriage, he figured he wouldn’t be able to put food on the table if all he did was dream.

Amane froze in place, not expecting Shuuto to say such a thing, his father smiling wryly as if to say, *I knew it*.

“For a long time now, I’ve gathered that you two have probably already made up your minds. Knowing you, once you’ve truly decided on something, you won’t bend that will of yours, nor would your determination change. Straightforwardly, with all your heart, you’ll continue to love and adore her. You really are just like us.”

“...Was Mom your first love too?”

“If you count you saying ‘Mommy, I love you, let’s get married!’ as a kid, then that goes for you, too. Right, Amane?”

“No way that counts.”

Inevitably, Amane averted his eyes from Shuuto, who was smiling comically along with a faint laugh. Honestly speaking, Amane's declaration of marriage to his Mom when he was young was just shy of being part of his dark history.

Such was the nonsense of a young child with no common sense or ethics cultivated. On top of that, the number of people he loved was limited, so even if it was brought up now, they would all know it was a joke, but what was embarrassing remained embarrassing.

Shihoko would bring it up from time to time, saying, "You used to say you'd marry me, didn't you?" which made his eye twitch, but when mentioned casually by Shuuto, all Amane felt was a sense of raw embarrassment.

"Well, jokes aside," Shuuto continued, "This is you we're talking about, so I knew you'd be thinking about your future. You're smart, so you're not thinking you can solve all of the problems awaiting you with nothing more than your own feelings, right?"

He hit the nail on the head. Shuuto's composed, gentle smile, as if he could see through everything, gave Amane goosebumps. Precisely since Amane understood that himself, he worried about what he should do. He'd considered consulting someone, but never did he think that Shuuto would be the one to bring it up.

"I'm suddenly scared of my Dad."

"I *am* your father, after all. Seeing through my son is a piece of cake."

Amane would normally suspect someone of being conceited to say such a phrase, but when said by his father, Amane had this feeling that he could really see through anything and everything, so he couldn't laugh it off. In fact, on top of finding out about Amane's inner conflict, Shuuto asking him about it despite understanding everything from the very start, made it all the more frightening.

"Truly… It's just like you to try and shoulder everything by yourself."

"...This was something I decided on my own, and I was going to tell Mahiru right after I'd done some level of planning."

"While going so far to plan things out while you're still so young is commendable, there's a limit to how much one... no, two people, can do. Whenever you find yourself in trouble, *do* make use of whatever resources you have on hand, alright?"

"But that doesn't mean I should depend on my parents all the time."

Shuuto had probably offered that as a parent's gesture of kindness. However, Amane felt that he was far too dependent on them in general. He was permitted to leave his hometown all by himself, and did not have any financial concerns that would restrict his lifestyle while doing so. In light of that, Amane tried to decide his future without consulting them, as much as possible.

He'd been doing something completely selfish, but Shuuto laughed it off, not seeming to care about Amane's hesitation, saying, "You show restraint with the weirdest of things."

"You really should rely on us for practical matters like this. Personally, as your parent, as well as Shiina-san's parent, I want to give my blessings to both of you. In fact, I want a girl like Shiina-san to be happy without a worry in the world, and the same goes for my son, too. I'd like to do this much, at the very least."

"...Isn't that something we should do with our own efforts and hard work?"

"And when do you think that will that be truly possible to achieve?"

"Ugh."

When put that way, it was a tough pill to swallow.

If they wanted to do everything themselves, they *might* be able to save up enough after working for a few years and devoting their all to saving up money. However, Amane didn't want to miss out on giving Mahiru a proper wedding ceremony, which many women dream of, and he also wanted to see Mahiru in a wedding dress or white kimono.

However, Amane knew that trying to do it all on their own would leave Mahiru waiting in suspense, so he was agonizing over the decision.

"Do you really want to make Shiina-san wait that long? Time is especially precious to girls, you know?"

"Ugh... Even so…"

"To me, a wedding ceremony is the start of a new life, and it's also the last time that your parents can offer up a substantial present. My cute son and daughter are going to leave their parents' care and live as husband and wife, so I wish you would let us help at least that much." Shuuto smiled and took a sip of coffee to ease his parched throat, and then continued. "Of course, if you decide to do everything yourself, we'll support your decision. If not, then we'd like to contribute Shiina-san's parents' share as well."

Shuuto and Shihoko both knew about Mahiru's family situation and intended to act as her real parents. Just one look at his father's face, and Amane was reminded that they cared about Mahiru like she was their own daughter, *and* like she was their daughter-in-law.

Like Shuuto said, they must have been showering Mahiru with love as parents who genuinely care about her, to make up for all the love she wasn't given by her real parents, who couldn't care less about her. For that very reason, although it may seem like Shuuto was offering a compromise, there was zero intention of concession.

Shuuto smiled as if he'd seen right through Amane, who was wondering if it was really okay for him to be spoiled like this, and casually ruffled Amane's hair.

"You've always been bad at indulging and relying on others, haven't you? It'll be fine, let me do something befitting of a parent."

"...You've spoiled me enough already."

"I wouldn't say that. You've ended up with a strong sense of independence in exchange for not having a proper rebellious phase. That even made me lonely, you know?"

Shuuto had no intention of stopping his ruffling, and Amane didn't brush his hand away, either. He found it ticklish and embarrassing, but not unpleasant. The trust he had in his father, and the sense of security it inspired in him, allowed Amane to obediently accept his father's gesture of love.

"It'll all be worth it when you become a parent, Amane, and show us our grandchild's face. You can worry about showing support back to us, your parents, once your lives are stabilized. Fortunately, Shihoko-san and I are both healthy. We're taking care of our health, and our family tends to live long. Make sure you repay us well when the time comes."

Shuuto grinned as he spoiled him, treating him like a child, and Amane relaxed, a warm feeling gradually seeping into his heart. Amane was truly glad to be their child, and resigned himself to being spoiled like one.

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By the time Mahiru and Shihoko returned home from shopping, Shuuto had returned to his usual self, no longer treating Amane with indulgent looks and gestures. Being spoiled like that in front of Mahiru would have been

unbearable for him, so Amane was glad it was over, but at the same time, he also felt just a little reluctant to give it up.

However, Amane wanted to act like a proper man in front of Mahiru, so he greeted them with a calm expression, showing no hint of what had happened before. “Welcome back. Done with your shopping and chatting?”

“Of course. Right, Mahiru-chan?”

“...Y-Yes.”

In contrast to Shihoko, who was cheerful and confident, Mahiru was fidgeting and shrinking, so in all likelihood, his mother had been putting all sorts of unnecessary thoughts in her head. But now wasn’t the right time to ask about it, so he purposefully ignored that assumption and took their bags instead.

Since Mahiru blushed upon facing his loving gaze, Amane’s *suspicion* of her indoctrination changed to *conviction*, and he ended up giving his mother an exasperated look. Shihoko, on the other hand, was undeterred, smiling calmly.

Her smile was filled with a mysterious sense of accomplishment, so Amane wanted to question her himself about what she’d indoctrinated Mahiru with.

“...I’m begging you, don’t teach her anything weird.”

“Ara, you’re mistaken. I hadn’t taught her anything weird. I was just giving her advice on something important when you two spend time together.”

“Is that not something we’ll be learning slowly, on our own, from now on?”

“It’s not something you can discuss with a boy, so it’s fine. You should learn from the wisdom of your ancestors, you know?”

“...Is it okay for me to ask Mahiru about that *something*?”

“You’ll understand sooner or later, so there’s no problem. I think it’s unbecoming of a man to rush.”

Hearing that, Amane had no choice but to keep quiet.

It didn’t seem like Mahiru was willing to talk to him about it either, and he understood that there were complicated conversations that could only be held between women, so he knew better than to force an answer out of them.

However, based on his mother’s actions up until now, it was bound to be something he shouldn’t completely trust. So although he wouldn’t ask for it forcefully, he deemed it necessary to keep it in the back of his mind for later.

Sending Shihoko a cold look, who returned nothing but smiles and grins, Amane carried the grocery bag to the kitchen and stuffed the fresh food into the fridge.

His parents planned to eat dinner tonight at Amane's place before heading back to the hotel, so they'd need to prepare enough food for four—twice as many servings as the usual. Somehow, it felt a little embarrassing.

"...Are you curious about it, Amane-kun?"

Amane shrugged slightly as Mahiru, who had finished washing her hands, suddenly caught sight of his expression and asked.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious, but I talked to my dad about a lot of things, and I don't feel like telling you about that yet, either. So let's call it even, Mahiru."

"Huh? Wh-What did you talk about?"

"Secret."

As Amane tossed the vegetables into the vegetable drawer with a mischievous smile, similar to the one Mahiru would show him every so often, she became rather agitated, softly hitting Amane on his back. He couldn't help but let out a chuckle.

"——That said, Amane. I won't interfere with what you want to give Mahiru-chan, okay?"

Those were the words Shuuto had told him after he had thoroughly ruffled his hair.

Of course, Amane wasn't intending to rely on his parents to that extent, so he was planning on working part-time to increase his savings. He had no intention of cutting corners on his entrance exams either, so he'd have to work even harder to balance both work and studies.

...Looks like I'll have to turn to Kido.

Ayaka may have been half-joking, but she did offer Amane an invitation for a part-time job, so it seemed like a good idea to go along with it. He wouldn't call himself great at customer service, but the opportunity was just right for gaining the social experience he needed.

Looks like there's gonna be more things I'll have to work hard on from now on. Amane nodded solemnly, and Mahiru looked up at him with a worried look on her face.

Amane smiled at Mahiru's expression, telling her "It's a secret" one last time as he closed the vegetable drawer in high spirits.

Chapter 3

First Steps Towards the Goal!

“Eh? I’ll go and ask the manager, but they did say that they needed more hands, so I think it’ll totally be okay.”

Amane immediately contacted Ayaka, taking advantage of the fact that he had the next day off too. He had exchanged contact information with her during the preparation phase of the cultural festival just a few days ago.

Just as he was worrying where he would work for a part-time job, Amane remembered Ayaka’s invitation from the other day. Amane then decided to accept her offer, both to learn more about how society operated and to improve on his lack of interpersonal skills.

Amane stood by the entrance to his apartment complex. He wanted to surprise Mahiru, so he made the call in a place where she wouldn’t hear him.

Amane thought that even the tolerant Ayaka would be troubled if he were to suddenly follow up on the offer, especially considering that he had turned down her initial invitation, but Ayaka had instead responded positively. Amane was simply left bewildered.

“Well… erm, what about the interview?”

“You’ll probably have to do one, even with my help, but I suppose they’ll accept you quickly without any problems. You’ll be introduced through me, so they’ll know there’s no problems with your personality or anything like that. Despite how I look, I’m a very serious girl when it comes to my part-time job; the manager even places their trust in me.”

Amane was not at all surprised by the statement, but it seemed that Ayaka was rather trusted at her job, after all. This was likely due to her personality; earnest, amiable, open-minded, and not to mention bright. He understood this even from the little time he had known Ayaka, and it came as no surprise to him that she was well-liked.

Amane could vividly imagine Ayaka puffing out her chest as he heard an, **“*ahem*,”** resonate through the phone. He couldn’t help but be amused.

“Frankly, I don’t mind introducing you, but are you okay with this part-time job in particular, Fujimiya-kun?”

“Well, I’ve gotten used to customer service now, after all.”

“Hm? Not in that way. Was Shiina-san okay with this? Or rather, did you explain everything to her?”

“N-Not yet. I haven’t discussed it with her as of now.”

“It won’t do any good if you haven’t already talked it out with her properly, don’t you think? I doubt you’ll be short of cash if you end up working here, but I wonder if Shiina-san will get jealous or something~?”

“Ugh. That’s…”

Right now, Amane was asking to be introduced to a part-time job. And working at that job was, of course, Ayaka.

The café in question was the café that lent them the costumes for the cultural festival they had just held. In other words, this was the café where employees served customers while wearing those very costumes. Naturally, Amane too would be wearing a costume if he were to get hired, just as he did during the festival.

There was the option of working without telling Mahiru, but she would be devastated once she learned of it. No matter how Amane sliced it, he would be running the risk of hurting her feelings.

A female customer had asked Amane for his contact information back during the cultural festival, and Mahiru sulked. Knowing this, Amane was not in favor of doing anything that would make her feel uneasy. Of course, the very possibility of Amane cheating wasn’t even something he would ever consider, and Mahiru herself believed that he wouldn’t do so, but this was a problem born from emotions; logic was a different matter.

“Why’d you suddenly feel like starting to work in the first place?”

Ayaka had only asked him a simple question, but Amane kept his mouth firmly shut.

If Amane were to ask Ayaka to keep the reason a secret from Mahiru, she would respect his wishes. To tell her that it was for the purpose of saving money for a ring, however, proved too embarrassing for him.

Everyone he knew was likely aware that Amane pampered Mahiru too much for his own good—he was even aware of it himself. But even so, he hesitated to explain that he wanted to present her with a ring.

However, if he refused to tell her, Ayaka wouldn’t be the least convinced,

and it was not a good idea to hide things from her to begin with. She was someone who offered him a helping hand.

"...Actually, erm. Could you not tell anyone, especially Mahiru, about this?"

"Ah— I guessed it. You want to give Shiina-san some kind of present. Something for Christmas, perhaps?"

"R-Rather than for Christmas… Well, it's preparation for next year. Erm, I'd like to get her a ring…"

Amane ground out the last of his response, and hunched over as the resulting silence stretched on.

Impatient, Amane waited for Ayaka's reply. He wondered whether he was moving too fast right now, him still being a student and all. After a good ten seconds of silence, **"Ah… I've been dealt a heavy blow through the phone,"** Ayaka whispered gently before continuing, **"So that's how it is. I understand your intentions, Fujimiya-kun, and I am now convinced."**

"...Yeah. Erm, it's something that I want to obtain properly. With my own hard work."

"I see, I see. Then perhaps you should avoid working at my place. Though you're just doing your best for her, I doubt Shiina-san would be happy knowing her boyfriend is working at a place where he has to interact with a lot of women."

She made a valid point, so Amane replied, "That's true. Sorry for not thinking about that." He considered heading back to his apartment and taking another good look at the job listing website, but then heard a voice saying, **"But instead…"** from the other side of the phone.

"If you don't mind working at a different coffee shop, I can still introduce you. There's this coffee shop managed by my aunt; it's rather quiet and the customer demographic is older, so I think it'll be a good fit for you personality-wise."

"That'd be ideal, but… you haven't worked there yourself, Kido?"

Amane believed that if she had those connections within her own family, there was no particular reason not to work there. However, Ayaka seemed to be having a hard time choosing her words. **"Ah, yeah…"** her voice sounded strained on the other end of the phone.

"Hmm… Well, you see; I'm like… not good at dealing with my aunt..."

"Yet you're going to introduce me to her? I'm really sorry about all of

this.”

“Ah, no, that’s not what I meant, okay? My aunt… how should I put it... She’s really, really fond of cats, I guess?”

“Does she dote on her cats?”

“That’s right. My aunt is really close to my mother, and since I’m her daughter, she spoils me a lot, but… she dotes on me so much that it is rather smothering, and I feel like it is impossible for me to do anything by myself when I’m there. Besides, when it comes to running a workplace, changing your attitude towards an employee and giving them special treatment isn’t good; the other employees might get mad when they see it.”

Ayaka was more troubled than against it. She was likely treated in the same way Shihoko tended to treat Mahiru.

Shihoko would spoil Mahiru deliberately, knowing that Mahiru was firm and independent in nature, though Mahiru was likely affected differently when compared to Ayaka’s case.

“That’s why I’m not working for my aunt, but instead for an acquaintance of hers. It might be strange for me to say this about myself, but I take pride in the fact that people are fond of my personality.”

“Yeah, that’s true. You’re pretty friendly and you attract the people around you.”

“Shiina-san will get jealous if you say stuff like that lightly, so don’t do it often. My situation aside, I can confirm the offer with my aunt if you’re okay with it, Fujimiya-kun, and if she accepts you, how about getting a tour around the workplace? That way, you can decide properly after getting to see the workplace, and you might find it easier to start working.”

“That’d really help me out, but… are you sure it’s okay for you to go that far?”

“It’s okay, it’s okay. I know that you love Shiina-san, so please let me help you out. I’ll even give you advice on picking the ring if you want, you know?”

“...Well, I might ask you when the time comes. Chitose, too.”

“Hehe. Leave it to me.”

It was ideal to consult a woman’s opinions regarding rings, and most importantly, Chitose had been watching over and supporting him and Mahiru since the beginning. Amane was well aware of both of these things, and there

was no way he wouldn't ask Chitose to tag along. If possible, he wanted the assistance of both of them.

Despite that, Amane wouldn't buy a ring until the far future, so they only made vague promises, **"I'll contact you later, or give you a report at school,"** Ayaka said as she hung up the phone.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

"...A part-time job?"

Once Amane returned home and called out to Mahiru, who was relaxing on the sofa, she seemed quite surprised when she looked back at him.

"Why so suddenly, and why now? We will be taking the entrance exams next year, and besides, we should be starting to review for them soon."

Amane expected this objection from Mahiru, though he also knew that he couldn't bring himself to hide his plans, so he was simply straightforward, and told her just that he intended to get a part-time job, without going into details. However, Mahiru's question was a valid one.

Amane wanted to hide his full plan from Mahiru until he was able to accomplish his goal, but he was well aware that beginning to work in the second half of his second year was rather unnatural, especially given that he would soon begin preparing for his final exams.

"Ah… Well, there's this one thing that I really want to buy."

"Something you want?"

"There's also the benefit of gaining social experience," Amane continued, "Of course, I don't plan to hinder my studies by taking a lot of shifts, and besides, I think I'll have saved up enough money by the time the school halts club activities, so I should be able to put all my effort into studying before the entrance exams are held. Thinking about my grades, they should be around the same level as those who study while doing club activities; it all depends on how much effort I put in, and I have no intention of slacking. I won't blame my job even if my grades start to drop."

Since Amane was not part of any clubs and had no part-time job, he had more time to study than students who participated in club activities. This gave him more options, but if he were to begin working now, the amount of effort he would need to expend would certainly increase.

Amane was aware that he was rather good at academics, but if he were to

spend a lot of his time working, the amount of effort he put in up until now would not be enough to maintain his current grades.

However, Amane had absolutely no intention of giving up on attending college or his future with Mahiru. Instead, Amane intended to work even harder on his own than he did before. He planned to study harder and pay closer attention during class, trying to absorb more information at once.

Even if this meant taking on a heavy burden, Amane had no intention of compromising or backing down.

When Amane stared at Mahiru with an earnest gaze showing his determination, she looked down, furrowing her brow as if she were troubled.

"No, there's no need for me to interfere with your decision, and if you're thinking that far ahead, I'll respect your choice, Amane-kun. Erm, it would be lonely to spend less time with you, but…"

Mahiru let out a slightly lonely smile, which caused Amane's resolve to waver slightly, but this wasn't a decision he could back down from. He gave her a smile of his own.

"I do feel sorry about this. In exchange, when I get time off work I'll prioritize spending that time with you, Mahiru."

"You always put me first, Amane-kun. You should prioritize yourself sometimes, too, okay?"

"Prioritizing my own feelings only leads to me putting you first anyways, Mahiru, so it's fine—"

Fundamentally, Amane wouldn't be satisfied if he simply prioritized himself in everything that he did. Being together with Mahiru was the only way he could feel a sense of fulfillment; Mahiru's happiness was Amane's happiness, too.

Amane understood that he loved Mahiru so deeply that her happiness was exactly the same thing as his happiness, and although chasing such thoughts left him feeling rather restless, it was undeniable that Amane only felt most fulfilled when seeing the person he loved living so happily.

That was why Amane could stare at her so directly. He did not intend to abandon Mahiru or neglect her in the slightest. Knowing that his words came from the heart, Mahiru firmly pressed her forehead against Amane's arm, half-hiding a worried frown**.**

Chapter 4

New Interactions

Upon returning to school after the holiday, following the cultural festival, the atmosphere was slightly restless, perhaps because the excitement of the festival hadn't completely faded just yet.

Even Amane's class, which was usually more on the calm side, was at least twenty percent livelier than usual. There were classmates whispering from time to time, mostly about who had started dating who, and Amane was keenly aware that the cultural festival had an effect on student relationships, namely the blooming of new couples.

The occasional glance would come his way, but they were mainly directed towards Mahiru, so it was more likely that the topic was her appearance at the cultural festival and whatnot.

"Mornin'."

Itsuki entered the classroom, looking a tad drowsy, and headed straight over to Amane. Amane waved his hand loosely in response and replied "Mornin'," as he briefly examined Itsuki's face. Amane hadn't followed up to ask Itsuki how it'd been at home, after he confided his worries during their karaoke session.

Itsuki was bound to be down in the dumps if Daiki had said something to him afterward, but as far as Amane could tell, Itsuki appeared to be his usual self. Amane was relieved, but didn't show it.

"Good morning, Shiina-san." Itsuki turned to Mahiru, "Today, you're still... *Hmm?*"

"Good morning to you, Akazawa-san. Is something the matter?"

Mahiru stood by Amane's side as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and Itsuki smiled as he greeted her. But when he saw her face, Itsuki suddenly grew suspicious, his eyes narrowing. He examined her closely as if to confirm something, then scratched his cheek.

...What's with that expression?

Amane narrowed his eyes in the same way, wondering if some kind of

issue had arisen, but despite Itsuki looking like he had something he wanted to say, the look he gave to Mahiru clearly wasn't out of criticism. This left Amane perplexed.

"...*Come on*, Amane-*kun*. Over here."

"Huh?"

"Just c'mere." Itsuki insisted, calling him over for some reason, so Amane blatantly flashed a skeptical look as he let Itsuki lead him over to a corner of the classroom. After that, Itsuki tried to inconspicuously huddle close, and quietly began his interrogation.

"Hey, did you cross the line with Shiina-san?"

"*HUH!?*"

Amane's sudden shout caught Mahiru's attention, causing her to look over from a distance to see what was happening. Trying to prevent himself from blushing with embarrassment at the thought of saying something inappropriate, Amane waved his hand and simply replied, "It's nothing." But as soon as Mahiru's gaze shifted away for a moment, Amane turned to glare at Itsuki, though the astounded look that greeted Amane left him speechless.

"Hey, hey. Why d'you think we moved over here, man? Don't blow it."

"*Don't blow it?* That's only because you said something weird out of the blue."

"I'm not being weird. You just haven't realized that those kinds of vibes are just rolling off the two of you all over the place…" Itsuki began. "Shiina-san seems a little different than usual, and besides that, you seem to have recently closed some distance with her. You've always been close ever since you revealed your relationship, but it's clear as day that the mood you've got between you now is even more…"

Being told that there was a change in their atmosphere, Amane briefly glanced in Mahiru's direction. She was waiting quietly by his seat, looking at him curiously. But when they locked eyes, she turned bashful.

"Nothing's changed, has it?"

"You just can't see things objectively. Both of you are always flirting, yes, but the atmosphere you two have going right now differs quite a bit from what you had during the cultural festival. You've got a *we belong to each other* vibe going now, like you two already know one another *really* well."

"Whatever you're imagining, it didn't happen."

"Oh, *really?*"

"At the very least, we didn't go all the way."

If Amane remained vague here, Itsuki would start grinning as if he saw through everything, so Amane poked Itsuki's side with his fist, attempting to disrupt that annoying face of his. There was a bit of force behind the prodding, but Itsuki was seemingly completely unfazed. "Stop trying to hide your embarrassment." Itsuki said, laughing. Feeling frustrated, Amane stomped on Itsuki's foot, though he also let out a soft sigh of resignation.

Amane shuddered at Itsuki's perceptiveness, having noticed this change right away, but Amane had intended to tell Itsuki and Chitose about what lay ahead for him and Mahiru either way. He wasn't planning on sharing how far they had gone physically, but he did believe that he should at least tell them of his future plans.

"...In the first place, I don't intend to go that far yet. I made a promise with Mahiru."

"A promise?"

"That I won't do it until I'm able to take responsibility. I said that I'll take responsibility for the rest of my life, and asked her to please wait until then."

As Amane informed Itsuki of the promise, once again realizing it was something too embarrassing to share openly, Itsuki's eyes widened in surprise, and then he looked at him with a subtly exasperated, but impressed look that contained conflicting emotions.

"I think your perseverance and sincerity are amazing, and I really do respect it, man. But will you be fine doing it? In every sense of the word."

"...I might not be okay, but it's fine. I want to take good care of her, and, erm, I'm serious about her."

Having found someone to walk with him forever from now on, Amane wanted to respect and cherish her.

Truth be told, Amane *was* a little worried about whether he'd be able to endure through the wait, but he couldn't break his promise. He'd be too embarrassed to do so now, after all, so he planned to push through one way or another.

"That's just like you, Amane. You really are head over heels for her."

"Shut up."

"Well, I'm sure Shiina-san's over the moon if you're that serious about her. By the way, if there's a time you really can't take it anymore, just let me know. I'll help you out with a support item."

"I know what you're planning to give me, but it's none of your business, dude."

“Pretty sure you’ll regret trying to act cool before long, though…”

Feeling a little uncomfortable about his friend’s crude concern, Amane refused the offer. However, Itsuki simply shrugged his shoulders in response, seemingly exasperated.

Amane may end up having to rely on such a measure in the future, but at least at this stage, that wouldn’t be necessary. Furthermore, the question of how Itsuki had obtained that kind of item floated to the surface, and Amane was tempted to grill him on how he’d got his hands on something like that.

With a dramatic sigh, Amane resolutely returned Itsuki’s irked look. “Anyway, I plan to be together with Mahiru after graduation, and to that end, I’ve got preparations to make.”

“Preparations, as in?”

“Ah, good morning, Fujimiya-kun. What are you sneaking around here for?”

As if on cue, Ayaka entered the classroom at just the right time, and Amane waved his hand at her. She looked at the two of them with curious eyes as she sauntered over to them.

“*Hmm*, what’s going on? It’s a little suspicious to see two boys whispering to each other all sneakily like that,” she said. “One vote for Akazawa-kun bringing up something weird with Fujimiya-kun.”

“Not even an ounce of trust in me, huh!?” Itsuki retorted.

“Hahaha.” Ayaka laughed casually as she brushed him off, and then she looked at Amane, hesitant, seemingly contemplating whether she should say something or not. She glanced over at Itsuki, unsure if she should deliver the news with him present, hinting, *Akazawa-kun’s here, but should I say it? Or should I tell you later?*

As far as Amane was concerned, he had no intention of hiding his part-time job from Itsuki, and he’d planned to tell Itsuki the reason for him getting one anyway. So, when Amane asked, “Have you made any progress on what I asked?” Ayaka then smiled, looking a little relieved.

“About the part-time job, my aunt said it was a-okay, so we were wondering if you could let us know when you’re free to stop by.”

“Okay, got it. I’ll call you later.”

“Okayy. Roger that!”

“Sorry for this, I know I’m troubling you.”

“No problem. I want to help when my friend’s in trouble, and besides, my aunt said she was over the moon that I relied on her for once.”

Seeing a slightly troubled smile from Ayaka, Amane couldn't help but faintly smile wryly in return. She seemed to be doted on heavily by her aunt, for she was showing a troubled look. But for Amane, as the one who'd been helped by her, he was nothing but grateful for the job introduction. He considered giving her a proper token of his gratitude down the road sometime.

With a wave of her hand, Ayaka said, "I'll see you later," and headed back to her seat. As she left, Amane turned to look at Itsuki, who nodded back in understanding.

"I've got the gist of it. Sounds like you've got a lot on your plate, man."

"My parents said they wanted to cover the cost of the wedding ceremony, but at the very least, I want to buy the ring myself," Amane cleared up. "I chose to do this, so I should at least do some of the work to achieve my wish."

It wouldn't be acceptable for Amane to leave everything related to the wedding to his parents, especially considering the fact that it was his own vow to keep. For the sake of his pride, he should prepare for at least some part of it with his own power.

Although it didn't feel like everything was entirely his own effort, since he had gotten the job through Ayaka's introduction, he believed that it was acceptable to seek help from others to achieve his goal smoothly, nonetheless.

"You really are committed when it comes to making decisions, aren't you?" Itsuki observed. "I do think that it's admirable. But…"

"But?" probed Amane.

"...Why didn't you ask me first, if you needed help with something like that?"

Surprised by Itsuki's sulky remark, Amane stared at him for a moment before making a big deal of ruffling Itsuki's hair.

"I'll rely on you properly next time."

This all seemed to embarrass Itsuki, however, as he shook Amane off and prodded him in the shoulder. Amane knew he was just trying to hide his embarrassment, so he laughed like Itsuki had earlier, letting the whole thing slide.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

“Ahaha, yeah, even Ikkun would sulk about that.”

After lunch, Chitose was curious as to why Itsuki had been acting somewhat sulky in the morning and called Amane out into the hallway to ask about what happened. He scowled. Amane knew that if he honestly told her the circumstances, she’d slap him on the back with a nonchalant smile, but she *still* showed no signs of stopping her assault. If anything, her attacks escalated and she said “Amane, this is why you’re so…” with a fed up expression.

Chitose seemed more intent at driving home her point rather than delivering pain with her slaps, and there seemed to obviously be another reason at play. Amane also knew he was the one at fault, so he stayed put, pressured by her broad smile.

“Ikkun has all sorts of friends and connections, and yet you turned to someone else instead of relying on him. Of course he’d feel a little upset about that. After all, other than Mahirun, Ikkun is your closest friend, right?”

“Ugh, I-I do feel bad about that…”

Amane had remembered the work invitation that Ayaka had given him a while ago, which was why he asked her for her assistance. However, Itsuki was bound to not appreciate that decision.

Amane considered Itsuki his closest male friend, and he’d relied on him a great deal up until now, so he felt sorry for how he’d made Itsuki feel left out this time around. In part because Amane believed he relied on Itsuki a little too much, he tried to avoid causing him any additional burden. In this case, however, it seemed to have backfired.

“I’m sure he wanted you to rely on him,” Chitose continued her explanation. “Ikkun’s proud of being your best friend, and he feels like he’s indebted to you since you saved him in the past.”

“I saved him…? If anything, I’m the one who’s always being saved. The one who should be repaying the favor is *me*,” replied Amane. “I don’t want to cause him any more trouble than I already have.”

“That’s one of your shortcomings, Amane. You tend to feel like what you think of yourself is the same as what *others* think of you. You shouldn’t deny that from his perspective, Ikkun *has* been saved by you. Denying that fact would be as good as denying his feelings as well, wouldn’t it?”

“...I really do feel bad about it.”

“Well, as long as you understand how he feels. If you’re feeling

remorseful, how about consulting him about something else? Of course, that includes me as well."

With a smile that shone brighter than ever, Chitose looked up at Amane with a beaming expression. Amane's cheeks twitched in response.

"...Are you angry too, Chitose?"

"Ufufu," Chitose laughed.

She smiled strangely, and while her beaming face did seem to reflect her true thoughts, her eyes were not smiling. Chitose usually sported a carefree smile, but now it was hard to call it a genuine one.

"Well, of course I am! We've been close friends for a good year and a half, but you haven't confided anything in me with anything. Isn't that pretty sad?"

"Ugh. I-I'm really sorry about that. I'll be more careful from now on."

"Honestly. You can be so cold at times. And besides, if you don't tell us about what you're trying to do, we won't know what to keep a secret from Mahirun, you know? You wanna surprise her, don't you?"

"...You make a valid point."

"You've got no choice but to spill the beans, then. Or else you'll just be shooting yourself in the foot."

Chitose jabbed him in his side, but Amane could only accept the blow as it was something he'd brought upon himself. After playfully prodding him in his sides for a while, Chitose took a deep breath as if to reset the conversation.

"That said, Amane, it comes as no surprise that you're thinking about your future with Mahirun, and I understand that you truly love her. It's just that, seeing you so *lovey-dovey* is quite a departure from the old you, isn't it?"

"Oh, hush."

Amane knew that he'd become much sweeter with Mahiru than he used to be. Plus, he had felt that he'd gotten closer to many other people than before. This change was caused by not only Mahiru, but also Itsuki and Chitose.

Although he was slightly annoyed with her calling it *lovey-dovey*, he couldn't deny that he was deeply in love with Mahiru, so it wasn't something he could refute. Having said that, it still wasn't amusing to have it be pointed out in such a way, so he inadvertently made a sour face.

"Anyway, I've already made up my mind. So, uh, I'd appreciate your

help, if possible.”

Wanting assistance from a woman’s perspective and simply as a friend, Amane bent his waist and lowered his head before Chitose, asking for her cooperation. A sigh of exasperation reached his ears.

“I’ll help you even if you don’t ask. After all, it’s for the sake of my best friend’s happiness.”

“Chitose…”

“I’m obviously talking about helping Mahirun, you know? You’re being all wishy-washy about it now, so your friendship ranking just nosedived.”

“*Geh*… Nothing I can do now.”

“Fufu, I’m just kidding around. You’re both dear friends of mine. I want things to go well for you two, and if I can help somehow, I will.”

When Amane lifted his head, Chitose was standing before him, wearing her usual bright and cheerful smile. Seeing her standing tall with pride, he felt a sense of relief wash over him. He smiled in return, lightly tapping her shoulder.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

“I see. So you’re going somewhere with Chitose today.”

After school the same day, when Amane tried to go home with Mahiru like they usually did, she turned him down in an apologetic voice. Shrugging it off with a smile, Amane accepted her response.

He had no intention to restrict or compel her to always be together with him, to begin with. There was absolutely no reason why they had to be together all the time. In fact, Amane couldn’t understand why Mahiru was so concerned about it herself.

As he reflected on his usual attitude, wondering if he gave off the impression that he was the type to be possessive, Mahiru was still looking apologetic.

“Erm, I might be late coming home today. Since Shihoko-san will be with me, I don’t think we will run into any problems.”

“Mom? Why her?”

Words he wasn’t expecting came flying at him and inadvertently, Amane stared sternly into Mahiru’s eyes. His parents hadn’t returned to their hometown yet. Apparently, they’d taken an extended vacation using their

paid leave and were going sightseeing on the way back, at Shihoko's request.

Amane was aware that his parents would be wandering around the area today since they were planning to go home tomorrow, but he really hadn't expected that not only Mahiru but also Chitose would get involved.

"Shihoko-san wants to talk with Chitose-san…," Mahiru explained, her voice trailing off.

"I know for a fact that Mom's gonna plant unnecessary ideas in her head," replied Amane.

"Ahaha, there's no way she would do something like that…"

"With my mother, it's absolutely possible. If it comes to that, I'm counting on you to stop her, Mahiru."

However, Amane understood that there was a greater likelihood that even if Mahiru wanted to stop her, Shihoko's momentum would be too strong to be stopped. So, Amane didn't place much hope in it. With a desperate plea to at least prevent his Mom from sharing the details of his black history, Amane gazed at Mahiru, not intending to stare too passionately, but she blushed and swiftly looked away.

Having finished her preparations to go home, Chitose approached the two of them with a chuckle. "Hey, hey! What're you two newlyweds doing over here?"

"I'm just worried that you might get some strange trinkets of knowledge from my mom," returned Amane.

"I see you've finally stopped denying that you're a married couple… Anyways, I was wondering what on Earth you were doing, staring at each other like that. But you don't have to worry about that."

"Mom's the type to reveal all sorts of things without realizing it. With a massive smile on her face, too."

"*Oh-ho*. In other words, there's something you wanna hide from us."

"Nothing of the sort, I just don't want my childhood stories being dug up and shared with others. You wouldn't like that either, would you?"

"Ugh, well that's…"

Amane became friends with Chitose in highschool, but according to the tidbits he'd heard from Itsuki and Kadowaki, Chitose used to act like a different person—seemingly with a personality polar opposite to the one she had now.

That topic could almost be classed as her own dark past, so naturally, Chitose was against talking about it much. *You know what to do if she tries to*

ask anything unnecessary, implied Amane as he looked at her, and Chitose nodded. “I get it, I get it,” she relented, shrugging her shoulders.

“Well, putting that aside, there’s also something I’d like to discuss with Shihoko-san myself, so it’s not like we’ll only be talking about you, Amane.”

“What are you gonna talk about?”

“Now that, my friend, is a secret among us girls. And so, I’ll be borrowing your wife, too. That okay?”

Chitose smiled and entwined her arm with Mahiru’s, to which Mahiru lowered her eyes in shyness, but then happily sidled up to her. Amane had no issues with it if Mahiru was okay with it, but he was still slightly concerned about what they were going to discuss.

Don’t say anything weird if you can help it. Please, thought Amane, reminding his mother in his mind as he watched the two girls clinging to each other cozily. However, a girl suddenly appeared and called out to him, peeking her head out from somewhere.

“Huh? You two aren’t going home together today?”

Ayaka, sporting a neatly done ponytail and an amicable smile, was surprised to see Chitose pulling Mahiru along by her hand.

“Ah, Kido.” Amane responded, “They said they’d be running an errand together today.”

“I see, I see. In that case… Shiina-san, may I borrow your husband for a bit?”

“*Huh?*”

Mahiru froze in place at Ayaka’s sudden request, unsure of whether she was more surprised that she’d referred to Amane as her *husband* or that she’d asked to borrow him, even though they were only friends. It remained unclear which one it was, but what *was* clear was that Mahiru was left staring at Ayaka, her expression suggesting that she’d been caught quite off guard.

Ayaka turned back to Amane. “If you don’t have anywhere to be, Fujimiya-kun, I’d like you to go out with me after this. Ah, and don’t worry, Shiina-san! I don’t mean that like a date!”

“I-I wasn’t at all worried about that, though…,” Mahiru insisted, her voice tapering off toward the end.

Since Ayaka was the one inviting him, it was likely something related to his part-time job.

Even though it was a sudden arrangement, it was a good opportunity nonetheless. Since it was related to his new part-time job, his parents coming

to visit was convenient, considering the needed paperwork. The employment contract required a parent's seal of approval.

"And what about you, Fujimiya-kun? You free?"

"Well, not like I have anything planned."

Amane didn't have any plans other than his usual training session and his assignments. Although luckily, this meant that he was able to accommodate her sudden invitation.

"That's great! We both happened to have no plans today, and since the two of you are always together, it's pretty hard to bring myself to barge in. I was pretty hesitant to ask you in the first place, you know?"

"It's not like we're always stuck together. We don't spend every second together even when we're at home."

"From what I can see, you two *are* always around each other, is what I meant. Even the way you phrased being *at home* together sounds like you're flirting with her, saying it like it's a natural occurrence and all," Ayaka said, dragging out the end of her sentence. After she implied that lovers aren't usually together to such an extent, Ayaka giggled at Amane, who had remained silent, unable to argue back at all. "Well, I guess that's because you two are close and important to each other. Isn't that right, Fujimiya-kun?"

"...Yeah, that's right. Is that so bad?"

"Nu-uh, I think it's good because it warms my heart just watching you two. Though I *gotta* say, Shiina-san's really being treasured, isn't she?"

Mahiru blushed and exuded an aura of happiness at the word *treasured*, but everyone around her had been caught in the crossfire, falling victim to her as collateral damage. However, Mahiru herself wasn't aware of what she'd done, it seemed. Amane had a feeling that Ayaka was doing it on purpose, but he couldn't really complain since he owed her a great deal.

Be that as it may, once Amane gave her a look that implied, *Just don't tell her the reason I'm getting a part-time job*, Ayaka responded to him with a smile and a thumbs up, to which Amane heaved out a sigh, leaving it at that.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

After parting ways with Chitose and Mahiru, Amane walked with Ayaka, letting her lead the way. Their destination seemed to be far enough away that it needed to be reached by train, but it wasn't too far from where he lived, so

it shouldn't pose a major issue to his commute.

The real question was whether or not they'd actually hire him… However, when Amane asked Ayaka about it, she replied, "Don't worry, don't worry." and smiled at him.

"My Auntie's shop is run by a small staff, and they've been getting more and more customers lately, so they were looking for someone polite wanting to help out. The wage is great, but it seems they were struggling to find someone who fit the atmosphere of the coffee shop and would be liked by the customers. And then came your offer, Fujimiya-kun! I was like, *how lucky!* It felt like a total godsend, that kind of thing. I'm sure you'll be able to handle it just fine, Fujimiya-kun."

"Not sure if I'm particularly polite, though."

While he wouldn't go out of his way to be rude, if called polite, Amane had to tilt his head in confusion. He liked to think he had necessary manners, but they were far from the ideal example of politeness.

He shrugged his shoulders, telling her that she was overestimating him, but Ayaka immediately replied with a cheerful, "No need to be modest!" dismissing Amane's worries. "You can handle yourself well around people and you adjust your attitude accordingly. Also, Fujimiya-kun, you act really politely in front of the teachers, just like an honor student."

"They are my elders, after all, and figures of authority, too… I'd rather have them think of me positively than negatively. Plus, there are benefits to having a good relationship with the teachers."

Of course, Amane treated those older than him or in positions of authority with respect, but there was also the ulterior motive of improving his grades and advancing onto college. These were things that were made easier by being on good terms with the teachers. While that wasn't everything, there was still a certain level of calculation involved in his decision to treat them the way he does, so he wouldn't really label himself a true honor student. True honor students were people like Mahiru and Yuuta. Amane was just adept at giving the impression that he was like them.

Musing that he lacked charm for thinking in such a way, Amane shrugged his shoulders, and Ayaka responded with a light smile.

"Isn't that fine?" Ayaka eased his nerves. "The important thing here is whether you have good manners and can adapt to different situations while showing others respect. In other words, acting in line with the TPO. Putting your personal intentions aside, the only thing that matters in the end is the

result. And if the results are good, then your inner thoughts don't matter quite as much." [2]

"...Is that also the kind of person you are, Kido?"

"Surprised? I'm actually the type who can be quite pragmatic. I don't necessarily look for the benefits in everything I do, but at the same time, I don't think it's strange to find some sort of benefits before doing something. To a certain extent, anyway. I don't always act out of the goodness of my heart."

So Ayaka said in a casual manner. Amane blinked in surprise at her harsh and clear-cut way of thinking, but his reaction wasn't one of shock or avoidance, but a sense of camaraderie.

"It's the same deal this time, too," Ayaka continued, "I proposed the idea because there were benefits in it for me. It's not one hundred percent out of goodwill or anything."

With Ayaka admitting it as straightforwardly as she was, it was easy for Amane to understand her good nature. "So, what's the benefit for you this time?" Amane asked, a slightly rueful smile showing on his face.

Ayaka had responded to his sudden and unreasonable request, and Amane believed that she accepted it mostly out of the goodness of her heart, but it seemed that she didn't want to admit to it herself.

"Well… of course, it's partly because my aunt's in trouble, but… the main reason is that I want to help Sou-chan make more friends."

"Kayano?"

"Yeah. Sou-chan is the quiet type and he tends to space out a lot, so he doesn't show much interest in others. But he seemed to have a good impression of you, Fujimiya-kun, and you also tend to keep to yourself. I thought you two would get along quite well, which is why I introduced you to the coffee shop Sou-chan works at instead. That way, I'll have solved both the issue of short staff and help Sou-chan make a new friend at the same time." Ayaka revealed her intentions and then apologized, saying. "I'm sorry. There were actually a lot of benefits in this for me." She looked somewhat dejected as she said so, and Amane laughed, shaking his head.

"Don't be sorry. That's the first I've heard about Kayano working here, and I'm a little surprised, but we're already acquainted. I can rest easy knowing that someone I know is working there, too, so I'm glad."

"Really? I'm glad to hear that." As if her tension had been lifted all at once, she looked relaxed and relieved. Amane was convinced that Ayaka was

indeed a good person at heart.

"Anyway, that's all well and good," Amane said, changing the topic. "But you don't work at your aunt's place even though your boyfriend works there?"

"Uh… About that, there's a reason for that too…" replied Ayaka. "As I mentioned earlier, my aunt does love me, but she likes being with Sou-chan the most."

"That so?"

"When we're together, we just end up glancing at each other and smiling, not getting any work done. We've been doted on together since we were little, you see. And if I were there, I'd get distracted by Sou-chan whenever I see him. Sou-chan would even say, '*Looks like you're about to drool, so cut it out*,' or something like that."

"*...Heh.*"

"Y-You just laughed, didn't you? Even I can tell right from wrong, I'll have you know! I wouldn't drool in front of other people!"

Ayaka blushed faintly and sulked, but her words lacked conviction and only added to its hilarity, prompting Amane to deliberately not hide his amusement and laugh out loud.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

After calming down the sulking Ayaka, Amane finally arrived at the coffee shop, which had a calm ambience to it.

The coffee shop had a classy atmosphere that made it almost seem old-fashioned, and it clearly appeared to cater to an older clientele, judging by its sophisticated appearance that exuded a tinge of high-class luxury.

"...Is this really the place?" Amane asked, bewildered.

"Why are you doubting me?" responded Ayaka. "This café is a nice and calm place, right?"

"I do think it's a nice place and all, but are you sure a student like me is fit to work here?"

When discussing the topic of cafés that hire students as part-time employees, one might imagine a typical large chain store, but the place Amane was brought to was on the opposite end of that spectrum—it had nothing short of a dignified air to it.

“And that’s why I invited someone like you, Fujimiya-kun. Young but just as reliable. Anyways, let’s go greet my aunt first,” Ayaka explained, before tacking on “Though, I don’t really feel like it…” in a whisper, clearly expressing her reluctance. Showing an awkward smile at Ayaka’s hesitant but ultimately positive mindset, Amane followed behind Ayaka out of curiosity about this aunt of hers.

As she pushed open the heavy door, featuring a prominent “CLOSED” sign, the faint creaking of hinges coupled with the cheerful chime of the doorbell somehow brought him a wave of nostalgia.

The café Ayaka had escorted him to lived up to the expectations one garnered from seeing its exterior, with a remarkably serene ambience on the inside. The interior décor was simple yet elegant with a dominant color scheme of dark oak and white, and the store itself was impeccably clean and well-maintained, adding to its impression of sophistication. Against one of the walls was a bookshelf packed full of literature that covered every inch of the wall.

At first glance, Amane noted that the café didn’t seem to have that many seats. The limited number of seating spaces was a clear indication that the establishment was privately owned, unlike the large chain coffee shops. However, thanks to that, the café managed to represent a very tranquil and relaxing space, and this made it the perfect place to take a breather from the hustle and bustle of the noisier chain stores.

Today appeared to be a day off, and there was not a single customer in sight, so Amane couldn’t stop himself from admiring the décor without reservation. Suddenly, a woman dressed in a navy blue apron came out from the back room.

First appearances painted her as a calm woman roughly a decade older than Amane.

She was a gorgeous woman with long black hair that seemed to suit the ambience of a coffee shop or old bookstore, but she appeared incredibly quiet and reserved, which made it hard to believe she was the aunt of the cheerful and friendly Ayaka.

“Oh… Ayaka-san. Welcome,” said the woman.

“It has been a while, Aunt Fumika.” Ayaka replied, bowing politely. The woman she referred to as Fumika looked back at her as she did so, giving her a gentle gaze and a smile.

“I’m glad you came. You rarely drop by even when Souji-kun’s around,

so I've been quite lonely."

"Uu, I'm sorry about that…" Ayaka answered. "I thought I might be bothering you, Aunt Fumika."

"Bothering? Don't be silly… Just having the two of you here makes me delighted. You both work so hard."

"*But that's a problem in itself*," Ayaka quietly murmured, but it seemed like her words didn't reach Fumika's ears. As he watched the two of them interact from a step behind, Amane tilted his head in confusion.

From the woman's appearance to her mannerisms, there was nothing out of the ordinary that would make Ayaka feel uncomfortable, so Amane was nothing short of perplexed. Upon observing their brief conversation, Amane had her down as a perfectly ordinary woman. In fact, the impression she gave off was one of calm and refined femininity, and he couldn't find any signs of the discomfort that Ayaka supposedly experienced.

If anything, there was an abundance of affection for Ayaka in the woman's eyes, and considering this, it was hard for Amane to understand why Ayaka felt uncomfortable around her aunt.

While it was true that everyone has their own thresholds for discomfort, and as such, he knew that he couldn't properly understand the whole situation yet, it was hard to grasp the reasoning behind her feelings.

As Amane watched Ayaka faltering slightly, the woman's gaze suddenly turned to him. Her pitch-black eyes flickered for a moment as if assessing him, but just a moment later, it softened into a gentle gaze.

"Would this boy be the one you mentioned, Ayaka-san? The one interested in working part-time?"

"Ah, that's right. He told me he wants to work part-time," Ayaka explained. "Fujimiya-kun, this woman is the owner of the coffee shop, Itomaki Fumika. She's my aunt."

"I am Fujimiya Amane," he said politely. "Thank you for taking the time to meet with me."

"Well… it's no problem. After all, it's a request from Ayaka-san. I trust her judgment when it comes to assessing people's skills, so I don't see any issues with it," Itomaki said, smiling ever so softly. Her expression eased as she gave him another quick look up and down, and then smiled at him once again.

Her elegant yet unfathomable smile exuded an overwhelming pressure, making Amane's hair stand on end. "Speaking of which, what kind of

relationship do you have with Ayaka-san?"

"She's a classmate and a friend. To both me and my girlfriend."

Feeling a strange shiver run down his spine, Amane promptly denied any suspicions she may have had, and her smile grew even gentler. With the uncomfortable chill gnawing at him dissipating, Amane realized that he'd most likely given the right answer.

"Is that so? I'm happy to hear that," Fumika said, seemingly relieved. "Since Ayaka-san and Souji-kun are in love with each other, it would be troublesome if you'd start to crush on her."

"I have a girlfriend who I have pledged my future to, so something like that is out of the question."

"Oh wow! That's wonderful…!"

As her black eyes sparkled and shone with a glint of light, Amane instinctively took a step back. However, Fumika, paying no heed to his reaction, blushed at what he'd said instead.

Her expression resembled that of a lovestruck maiden, and although a little late to the party, Amane gradually began to understand why Ayaka was having trouble handling her.

"It's wonderful to have such strong determination at your age. Did you apply for the job with that in mind?"

"That's right. Erm, I want to give my girlfriend a ring…"

"That's wonderful! Indeed, how lovely! If you're willing to work here with us, then by all means…!"

"Auntie!? Such a quick decision? Actually, I had a feeling this would happen… but *still!*"

Amane was frozen in place, having been hired even without a proper interview. Ayaka sighed with a perplexed and almost fed up expression on her face. Meanwhile, Fumika was beaming with a happy smile, clearly pleased with herself.

"Auntie, it's not good to pry too much, you know," Ayaka cautioned.

"Oh, I won't pry into things he doesn't want to share, okay? But I *am* curious how those two met…"

"Please keep your curiosity in check, Auntie. Or else I'll feel sorry for Fujimiya-kun, who would end up getting dragged into your hobby and your job."

"I will ask for his permission, okay?" Fumika insisted. "And I will only use the situation as reference material."

"Hobby and *job…?*" Amane asked, not keeping up with the conversation.

"Aunt Fumika runs this café, but it isn't her main job," Ayaka began to explain. "She's actually a writer and has other ventures on top of that, so I'm not too sure why she even runs a café…" Ayaka was skeptical, however. She blurted out, "Which makes it all the more strange that everything turns a profit despite that…" since the café wasn't her main business. Fumika, on the other hand, wore a smile that concealed her inner thoughts as she looked back at Ayaka.

"Needless to say, this café is running perfectly from a monetary standpoint," Fumika confirmed, "So you don't have to worry about us going out of business. Our employees are paid a generous amount, too."

"Auntie, please make sure you calculate their hourly wages properly. Don't just give them pocket money, okay?"

"You don't have to be such a worrywort…"

As Ayaka earnestly lectured the frowning Fumika, Amane mulled over a newfound worry of his. *Can I really start working here?* he thought, feeling a little uneasy about what was to come.

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For better or worse, Amane had been hired on the spot, and he then made his way back home, employment contract in hand. While it was less of an actual job interview and more of a simple meeting, Amane was relieved that he seemed to fit the bill of his employer.

Amane wasn't sure if it was suitable for the decision to be made so quickly, but it was a good thing that he'd found a job. In fact, everything had been going so smoothly for him that he worried there might be a catch later down the line. All that remained now was to have both himself and his parents sign and stamp the contract before returning it.

Ayaka apologized to him on the way home, but he'd already heard that Fumika had an unrelenting personality, so it was no surprise that Ayaka was intimidated by her. Her aunt was a different type from Shihoko, with the latter's approach being more on the forceful and pushy side.

Itomaki-san's the type of person that I can't let cross paths with Mom.

Today, his mother had met up with Chitose, but personally, he thought that those two were also bound to be a dangerous combination. In all honesty,

Amane was worried about what might happen during their little outing. Both Chitose and Shihoko were aware of the line they shouldn't cross, so he believed it'd be okay, but there was no doubt in his mind that Mahiru would become a victim to their momentum.

Guess I'll console her when she gets home, Amane decided, opening the front door to his apartment.

Seemingly to himself, Amane quietly announced his return, "I'm hooome… Wait, Dad?"

"Welcome back."

Amane thought nobody was home, so he whispered his greeting once he returned home. However, to his surprise, he was then greeted by Shuuto, who he assumed was out sightseeing somewhere. Amane was momentarily taken aback.

His parents were the ones renting out his apartment, and each had a spare key, so it wasn't all that strange for them to be there, and Amane didn't intend to kick up a fuss about it. However, he'd assumed that Shuuto was accompanying his mother on her outing with Mahiru and Chitose, so it came as a surprise to see Shuuto in his apartment.

Shuuto looked puzzled at Amane's surprise.

"Oh, I did contact you, but perhaps you didn't notice. Shihoko-san and the girls are having dinner elsewhere, so I thought I'd sort out your employment contract and whip something up for us to eat while I'm at it."

On the way home after wrapping up the job interview, Amane had sent his father a message telling him that he'd been accepted, and that one of his parents needed to sign the employment contract. However, Amane had put his phone away right after and must've not realized that he'd received any messages.

Having heard him, Amane took out his smartphone and noticed a notification indicating that Shuuto had sent him a message.

"Ah, my bad. I didn't notice. Also, wouldn't it have been better if you'd gone along with them, Dad?"

Amane had heard that they'd all gone out, but he hadn't expected them to stay out together until dinner. He understood that they got along well, most likely hitting it off, but he didn't know what to make of the fact that his father had been left out of the loop.

"Haha, this time is meant for the three of them to bond together. I figured that if I was there, Shirakawa-san would be reluctant to act as she usually

does, right? So, I thought it would be better to yield from the get-go and do my own thing… but after reading your message, Amane, I thought it was perfect timing."

In short, it would've been uncomfortable for both parties if his father accompanied the girls on their day out. Amane was convinced. Now understanding that his mother hadn't brought Shuuto along out of consideration for Chitose, he shrugged his shoulders. "Was that for the best? Staying here even though it's your precious day off?"

"We came out here with the intent to see you and your friends in the first place, Amane. The sightseeing was just an added bonus, you see. I used to live here, so it's not as novel an experience for me as it is for Shihoko-san."

"Well, you have a point, but…"

"And besides, wouldn't it be lonely for you to eat all on your lonesome? I'm worried about your cooking skills, too."

"...In case you were wondering, I *can* cook food now." Amane retorted, pouting. "The normal kind." He responded in a grumpy voice in retaliation to his father's teasing tone. Although only to a certain extent, Amane was right in saying that he was capable of cooking. Needless to say, his skills couldn't match up to Mahiru's culinary prowess, but he had still improved a great deal compared to when he'd first moved into his apartment.

As long as he followed the recipe properly, preparing the food exactly in line with its instructions, Amane had progressed to the point where even Mahiru would give him a passing grade.

Amane spoke with a slightly sharp tone, not wanting to look like he hadn't been making any effort to improve on his shortcomings, but for some reason, Shuuto's smile deepened as he listened to him.

"I see, I see. So you can do it if you try, after all, Amane. That's amazing," praised Shuuto.

"...Are you making fun of me?" Amane snapped back.

"No way; I'm not making fun of you in the slightest. It's just that cooking with a child of mine has always been one of my dreams, so I'm happy that the opportunity has so suddenly presented itself."

Faced with Shuuto's benign and affectionate smile—devoid of any malicious intentions—Amane's suspicions subsided. He looked at his father, who then asked him, "You'll lend me a hand then, won't you?" seemingly convinced of his skills.

Of course, Amane had no intention of leaving everything to his father, but

he couldn't help but smile bitterly at the way he spoke, likely having realized what motivated Amane to practice cooking. Amane thought that he still couldn't match up to his father.

"...Yeah, of course."

Shuuto nodded his head and gave a gentle smile. Following suit, Amane changed the nature of his smile as he nodded back, letting his bitter expression fade.

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After they had finished devouring the meatball pasta that they had made, Shuuto and Amane took a breather. But just as they did so, they heard the sound of the front door being unlocked, which signaled the return of Mahiru and Shihoko.

As Amane headed to the entrance, thinking that it'd be strange of him not to welcome Mahiru, he found her and Shihoko standing there, both of them holding an assemblage of shopping bags.

No matter how one looked at it, they had amassed a haul of shopping bags far too excessive to only be one day's worth of shopping. For someone like Amane, who didn't harbor a particularly strong desire for material possessions, he couldn't fathom what they'd do with it all or what could possibly even have been contained within them.

"...What's with all this excess baggage?" Amane asked, dumbfounded.

"Oh, don't worry Amane. There's enough for your share too, you see?" Replied his mother.

"I'm not really concerned about my share, but why did you go shopping and what did you buy?"

Knowing that his parents made a good income, and that they were generally not the type to waste money, Amane assumed that his mother must've really wanted whatever she bought. Even considering that, however, it was quite a lot of stuff.

"It's all clothes and cute accessories that I bought for Mahiru-chan, I suppose. Plus, we went all out, and bought clothes for you too, you know? Hand-picked by Mahiru-chan, mind you."

"I see you went out of your way to buy stuff I wouldn't normally wear at

all.”

Amane had mixed feelings about having his mother buy clothes for him, but since Mahiru had helped her in picking them out, they couldn’t be all that bad. He would have to ask Mahiru later to get the full story, but for the time being, Amane couldn’t shake the feeling that they’d brought back way too many shopping bags.

As Amane looked at Shihoko with a mixture of astonishment and disbelief, she slipped past him with a light-hearted smile, leaving him to exchange glances with Mahiru, who had been left behind.

Mahiru seemed a little perplexed, or rather, her face showed a hint of doubt that they might’ve bought a little too much during their outing. However, it appeared that Shihoko had purchased everything with Mahiru in mind, and her enthusiasm while doing so was bound to be contagious, so Mahiru likely couldn’t bring herself to stop his mother.

“...Don’t tell me you bought anything weird.”

“W-We didn’t buy anything like that, you know...?”

“I see. That’s good to hear, then.”

Amane breathed a sigh of mild relief at Mahiru, who was instead showing him a curious look, and he promptly took the shopping bag from her. He wasn’t sure whether the bag belonged to her exactly, but it didn’t sit well with him to burden her with carrying it.

As he watched Mahiru take off her shoes, Amane’s ears perked up towards the living room. Shihoko was discussing something with Shuuto, and it seemed to be related to his part-time job as he noticed Shihoko chiming in with the occasional “Oh my!” almost like a catchphrase.

Although Shuuto was the one who signed his employment contract as Amane’s guardian, it might’ve been appropriate for him to inform his mother of it beforehand, even though her signature was not technically necessary for the legal procedures.

To be frank, it was partly because Dad was easier to get a hold of, and partly because I couldn’t catch Mom, I guess.

Although his parents had ended up coming into his house, their initial plan was to go sightseeing instead. Thus, once they took a quick break, Shuuto and Shihoko would probably return to their hotel.

As Mahiru leaned on Amane’s body while changing into her slippers, he felt a ticklish sensation. While he waited for Mahiru, she suddenly looked up at him as if she’d just remembered something.

“By the way, how did the interview for your part-time job go?”

“Right… Well, it seems like they liked me, since I got the job.”

Amane hadn’t expected to get hired so easily, and was a little bewildered by it all. However, Mahiru casually replied, “I knew you would be accepted, Amane-kun,” seemingly unsurprised.

This made him feel like Mahiru was overestimating his abilities, or rather, that she placed too much trust in him. However, Amane also knew that if he voiced that thought, she’d scold him while saying, “There you go belittling yourself again,” so he kept his mouth shut.

“Out of curiosity, what kind of person is the café owner?” Mahiru asked.

“Well, how should I put it?” Amane began to explain. “She’s a unique kind of… Onee-san, I guess.”

“*Onee-san*.”

“I was told she was Kido’s aunt, but she seems to be pretty young compared to her mother, so she feels more like an older sister, I’d say.”

Amane refrained from asking her age given that it was taboo to ask a woman about such details, but from appearances, he thought she was probably in her mid to late twenties.

Incidentally, Amane had asked Ayaka for the details on their way back from the café, and it seemed that her mother doted on her younger sister, Fumika, who was much younger than she was. Fumika came to adore her older sister in return, and quickly also grew fond of her niece in much the same way. As a result, Fumika had a tendency to dote on Ayaka like a cat.

Amane gently poked at Mahiru’s now stiff cheeks, sensing that words *older sister* had made her tense up ever so slightly.

“Don’t worry about it, Mahiru. She seems to be the type who loves watching couples, and she was even asking to hear stories about you and me getting along.”

Anticipating that a small twinge of jealousy would arise, Amane quickly added that comment to prevent it. Mahiru blushed and shrunk uncomfortably, as if feeling uneasy about what he’d said.

“...I’m not doubting you or anything, okay? I was just wondering what I’d do if she fell in love with you, that’s all…”

“Not a chance.”

“There *is* a chance,” Mahiru insisted. Amane smiled wryly back at her, who was emphasizing it for some reason, persistent with her argument. He gently patted her head and felt sorry for her, thinking that it was wrong of

him to make her feel uneasy.

At first, Mahiru looked slightly annoyed, but she gradually relaxed as Amane continued to gently run his fingers through her soft hair, savoring the pleasant texture.

“Even if that were to happen, I wouldn’t act on it. And if, by some chance, it were to cause problems with my work, I’d quit on the spot,” Amane clarified.

“I-I don’t expect you to go that far… I was just feeling a little, erm, uneasy.”

“Exactly. That’s why if it ever made you feel uncomfortable, I’d be better off not working there. My goal isn’t to go to work itself, but to earn the money I need to achieve my goal.”

Given how Ayaka’s aunt behaved, it was impossible for her to fall in love with Amane in the slightest. However, in the unlikely event that it did happen, he’d begin searching for another job, albeit while feeling apologetic towards Ayaka.

Amane was working in order to make Mahiru happy, and if doing so ever brought her sadness, there’d be no need to persist with his current approach. He’d try to find another means of pursuing his goal.

He had no intention of muddling up his priorities, and knew better than to confuse his goal with the means he took to achieve it. Amane believed that he wasn’t foolish or daft enough to fall into that kind of trap.

“And that’s why you don’t need to worry,” Amane added, and hearing this, Mahiru buried her face into his chest. “Something wrong?” he then asked.

“...That’s what I love about you,” replied Mahiru.

“*Just* that?” Amane countered, poking fun at her.

“...That’s *one of the things* I love about you. *Baka.*” Mahiru muttered under her breath. After Amane teased her slightly, she playfully headbutted his chest, bringing a smile to his face. He then gently caressed her head as he accepted her playful gesture.

Chapter 5

Lunch for Three

“So? Did you end up getting the job?”

The next day after school, Itsuki asked Amane how everything had gone. Amane gave an honest nod in response to his question and lightly shrugged his shoulders.

“Kido was the one recommending you, so I wasn’t all that worried,” Itsuki confessed. “Though I’m glad that it’s a done deal nonetheless. That said, however, I *am* curious about why you look like you have something to get off your chest.”

“Honestly… you’re not wrong. The owner was quite the interesting person, to say the least.”

“She must really have a few screws loose if it was enough for you to point it out, Amane.” Itsuki said. “And that makes me all the more curious.” In response, Amane only smiled awkwardly at Itsuki, who was leaning against his chair and tilting it back and forth using his body weight. Amane intended to keep the specifics a secret for now, mostly because he believed that if he ever told Itsuki, he would end up making an appearance right away.

Amane planned to ask his friends to hold back from visiting him at the café until he had, at the very least, gotten used to the job. That sentiment remained true even for Mahiru. When he explained this to her in the morning, she began to sulk pointedly, after which the rest of his morning was then devoted to showering her with love and affection until she was back in high spirits again.

And now, Mahiru happened to be chatting with Chitose, who seemed to be grinning at him for whatever reason. Not wanting to entertain Chitose by giving a reaction, Amane chose to look away and ignore her before continuing the conversation.

“That said, while I do think she’s a bit of an oddball, I’m confident I can work there without a hitch. Plus, Kido told me to rely on Kayano if I’m ever in need of help.”

“Oh. Kido’s boyfriend, right? The undercover macho dude.”

“I bet he’d be at a loss for words if you said that to his face, man…” Amane remarked. “But then he’d just give Kido a death stare, probably.”

Rather than blame Itsuki, Souji would instead be the type to focus his crosshairs on Ayaka, who was clearly the root of the problem, as she was the one putting that idea into people’s heads to begin with.

Ayaka herself didn’t feel too remorseful, or so it seemed. Rather, she was more likely to return fire, responding with something like, “What’s so wrong about it?” so Amane felt the need to offer his condolences to Souji, who without realizing it, had now garnered that reputation, despite it being against his wishes.

As luck would have it, Ayaka still hadn’t arrived yet. She either hadn’t come to school yet or was in Souji’s classroom, because she was currently nowhere to be seen.

“Anyway, just knowing an acquaintance that works there gives me a sense of security, and from what I’ve heard from the owner, the regulars are generally older in age and the easy-going type, so I don’t think I’ll run into any issues.”

“Oh really? That’s good to hear. Whatever the case, you scoring the job is something worth celebrating. If anything happens down the line, don’t be afraid to come talk to me about it, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll be counting on you, *best friend*.” Amane gave Itsuki, who seemingly still held a grudge, a slap on the back. Then, as if hiding his embarrassment, Itsuki carved his mouth into a grin and hit Amane back with much greater force in retaliation.

This, too, was one of the ways Itsuki expressed his friendship, so Amane coughed a little and chuckled, saying, “You little shit…” while gently pressing his fist up against Itsuki’s cheek.

While playfully launching an attack on the side of Itsuki’s head, Amane glanced at Mahiru for a moment, and found her looking at him with a slightly dissatisfied ‘*Hmph—*’ look on her face.

It seemed that Mahiru was still unhappy that she couldn’t come along with Amane to his part-time job. She was clearly still thinking about the conversation this morning, and that sour sentiment seemed to loom over everything she was doing.

However, as upset as she was, Mahiru understood its necessity rationally, and after the *spoiling time* she had in the morning, she seemed convinced that

she simply needed to endure the wait. Therefore, there shouldn't be any complications long term.

Itsuki, following Amane's gaze, suddenly teased, "You're as loved as ever, aren't you?" to which Amane began to frown. Itsuki chuckled meekly as he absentmindedly brushed away Amane's fist.

"That reminds me, didn't Shiina-san and Chi go out shopping with your mom yesterday, Amane? Chi told me all about how she had plenty of fun helping pick out clothes for you, but what did Shiina-san buy in the end?"

"...Do I really have to tell you?"

"But of course, my best friend. Out with it. After all, you *did* leave me out of the loop last time."

"So you *are* still holding that against me…" Amane accused. "So… well, what she bought for me was… a cat-themed pajama onesie."

Amane reluctantly spilled the beans, recalling with horror the contents of the shopping bag that Mahiru had given him yesterday, and in response, Itsuki burst into an incredibly loud fit of laughter. Indeed. What Shihoko and Mahiru had bought for Amane was, unmistakably, a onesie with cat ears on its hood, meant as pajamas.

Surely, with such an outfit being too cute for its own good and clearly made with women in mind, the mental image made for a laughably poor fit for Amane, who was taller than most boys. But sensing the thought crossing Itsuki's mind, Amane continued, "Yes, they even had men's ones, too…" Amane completely confirmed it, fully aware that the girls had obtained one in a size that would fit even his proportions with ease. This left Itsuki at an absolute loss for words.

"A-Animal themed pajamas…? You?"

"Drop it, man. Mahiru's gonna wear a bunny-themed one in return, so it's all good."

Given Amane's age and build, wearing such undeniably cute pajamas would embarrass him beyond belief. However, as Mahiru had pleaded to him with such sparkling eyes, he simply had no choice in the matter. He likely would have refused if it meant wearing one on his own, but Mahiru must've realized that it would have been unfair of her to propose such a thing, because as compensation, she had also bought pale pink pajamas with a bunny-rabbit motif for herself, also in the form of a onesie.

Thus, under the condition that Mahiru would also wear her pajamas at the same time and with a veto on taking pictures, Amane agreed to wear the

onesie. He figured that they'd probably wear them during a future sleepover.

Compared to the negligee Mahiru had come in wearing last time, her new one would probably be a much more wholesome look for her. Amane was grateful that he'd have an easy time suppressing his inner demons.

"Gonna have Shiina-san send over a pic of you wearin' it," Itsuki joked.

"Hey, don't even go there. I've already told her to absolutely *not* take any pictures."

"Aww, c'mon~! That much is fine, man. You'll probably look all cute and adorable."

“Wipe that damn smirk off your face before saying that, dumbass.”

Itsuki, making up his mind to do something he probably shouldn’t, struggled to hold back his laughter as Amane grabbed him by the shoulders. Not counterattacking, Itsuki simply shook himself free, barely preventing himself from bursting into laughter once more.

All the while Chitose and Mahiru stood a short distance away. They nodded at each other, with Chitose commenting, “Those two really are close, don’t you think?” to which Mahiru replied, “Yes, they are,” as they witnessed Amane launch a half-hearted attack on Itsuki with the most sullen face he could muster.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

Amane usually ate lunch with Mahiru and the others, but today he had arranged to eat with Ayaka and Souji, at her invitation. While Ayaka didn’t explicitly say it, Amane figured that Ayaka was creating an opportunity for him to deepen his friendship with Souji, since they would be working together in the same store before long.

Amane had accepted her invitation obediently. Despite Souji being Ayaka’s boyfriend, Amane had practically never had a conversation with him before this point, so getting acquainted with him beforehand would obviously be beneficial in the long run. It was more appealing than having to work alongside him while starting from scratch as strangers.

Ayaka led Amane all the way up to the roof, and he noted that Souji was apparently waiting for them. Souji had already laid out a picnic blanket for the three of them, and since he wasn’t surprised in the slightest after seeing Amane, he must’ve already known that Amane was coming.

“And so, it has been decided that Fujimiya-kun will be working together with Sou-chan! Let the celebration commence!” Ayaka exclaimed.

She had a bright and amiable smile on her face as she looked at Amane, who had sat down on a corner of the blanket. Meanwhile, Souji, even after seeing him being smiled at by Ayaka, looked at Amane indifferently—or rather, somewhat pityingly.

“Ah…” Souji realized something. “You fell victim to one of Ayaka’s

schemes, I bet."

"H-How rude of you to call it that! I just guided the *appropriate* personnel to the *appropriate* workplace! That's all!"

"Well, one way or another, I *do* think Fujimiya's a good fit for that shop…"

"You see, you see? Sou-chan, I think you should reconsider your stance on me just a little bit. Geez." Ayaka looked considerably more childish than usual, and this was likely a side to her that she only showed in front of Souji. Amane couldn't help but be amused.

"I wouldn't say that," Amane interjected. "I *was* the one who asked for this opportunity, so Kido was actually helping me out."

"Is that so? I bet Fumika-san left you a little bewildered, though," Souji guessed.

"Well, can't deny that…"

Amane hadn't expected her to be *that* sort of woman, and frankly, he was a little intimidated at first. By no means was she a *bad* person, though, and Amane believed that people like her would be easy to handle once he gave her enough material to work with, so he wasn't against sharing some stories with her so long as it wouldn't cause any harm to him or Mahiru.

However, that didn't take away from the fact that if Ayaka *had* told him beforehand, Amane wouldn't have needed to play things by ear, so in a sense, he did have a bone to pick with her. Glancing over at Ayaka, she seemed to be unwrapping the *bento* she had brought along rather nervously. [3]

"I mean…" Ayaka's body tensed up a little. "I had no idea how to even begin explaining someone like Aunt Fumika. Her personality is so… intense…"

"True, but I did get the job in the end, so it's all good. And really, I don't think she's a bad person, either," Amane shared his thoughts on the matter.

"She *is* a good person, you know? It's just that, she'll spoil you to a preposterous extent once she takes a liking to you, and she's a bit of a natural airhead. Her daydreams are a daily occurrence."

"Well, it's not necessarily a bad thing if it's her source of inspiration, I guess. As long as it doesn't cause any real harm, that is."

"...I don't think there's any harm in it, yeah. Well, uh, probably." Amane was tempted to poke fun at her lack of certainty, but decided against it since it wasn't entirely Ayaka's fault. Instead, he began to unwrap the homemade *bento* that Mahiru had prepared for him.

Yesterday, Shuuto had prepared dinner, opting for pasta, so Amane's lunch consisted of last night's leftovers and extra ingredients set aside after cooking, as well as some side dishes that Mahiru had whipped up for him in the morning. He felt extremely bad about having her make a decent amount of side dishes so early in the morning, but she seemed to be enjoying herself, so he couldn't bring himself to stop her.

Feeling guilty for her daily troubles, Amane even considered preparing his lunch himself, but Mahiru would get upset every time he brought it up, saying things like, "Were you not satisfied with the food I made…?" so he couldn't bring himself to put the idea into practice.

Incidentally, Amane's parents would be on their way home by the time Amane and Mahiru finished school, so they had already said their goodbyes over the phone this morning. The conversation was brief and casual, and that was because they'd already promised to visit them again during winter or spring break.

"Oh, did Shiina-san make that for you?" Ayaka asked, her smile oozing with curiosity.

Ayaka observed Amane open his *bento*, noticing his satisfaction upon realizing that Mahiru's homemade *dashimaki tamago* was included once again.

"Yep, Mahiru made this one for me. And as for these sweet-and-sour *dango*, my dad made them for me when he was here," answered Amane. [4]

"Oh, so your dad can cook, huh? Mine's the same," Ayaka shared. "My mom can't cook, and she can't do housework for the life of her, so my dad does everything in the house."

"I get the feeling Kaori-san's more of a special case, though," Souji chimed in.

Kaori must be referring to Ayaka's mother. She was absolutely hopeless at doing housework, it seemed.

"...E–Eerm, just to clarify any misunderstandings, my mom's actually really good at doing her job, okay? She just struggles a bit with household chores! She hasn't exploded the microwave lately, and she can at least do the laundry!"

"It's her fault for not checking what she puts in the microwave to begin with," Souji argued. "And for laundry, it's just a matter of adding detergent and turning the washing machine on."

"Are you even *trying* to defend her, Sou-chan?"

“You brought this up yourself, Ayaka…” returned Souji. “Plus, I didn’t say that Kaori-san was to blame, did I?” Once she heard this, Ayaka realized that she’d accidentally let the cat out of the bag herself, and her face twisted into a grimace.

For the time being, Amane decided to act as if he hadn’t heard a thing and looked away, feigning ignorance.

“W-Well, I guess that’s why my parents wanted me to be able to handle the chores around the house—and I *have* learned, you know? But my dad still always finds something to complain about.”

“She was raised in hopes that she’d become girly and lady-like. That’s fine and all, but this girl ended up getting addicted to muscles, so they often came crying to me. ‘*Ayaka’s always chasing after naked men,*’ they’d say.”

!?

“Talk about foul-mouthed!” Eyes wide, Ayaka made her dissatisfaction known in a voice bordering on a yell; anyone who wasn’t familiar with the situation would likely misunderstand that statement. *Not like you can deny it, though*, Amane mused, picking out the truth in his words.

Saying that she loves muscles means that she wants to see them with bare skin, after all.

From Ayaka’s point of view, she simply sought physical beauty without any ulterior motives, but her father, who witnessed this on a daily basis, seemed to be shedding a tear or two at his daughter’s predilections.

“You were a bad influence on me, Sou-chan. And besides, I’m not chasing after *any* man! I only have eyes for you, Sou-chan. It’s your fault!”

“Don’t go blaming others for that.”

“Buh is’sh your fwault, Sou-hyan!”

Souji played with Ayaka’s cheeks and listened to Ayaka grumble out her complaints. Amane watched the two of them interact, and couldn’t help but chuckle. Perhaps it was in part due to their relationship, but he guessed that they had this kind of bond since they were kids. He found it refreshing to see a couple with a dynamic different from that of Itsuki and Chitose.

“...Wh–Why are you laughing?” Ayaka pressed, noticing Amane’s chuckle.

“No real reason, I just found it nice how close you two are.”

“You’re the last person I wanna hear that from, Fujimiya-kun. Especially when you’re always so *lovey-dovey* with Shiina-san. You wear your heart on your sleeve.”

“We’re not *that* flirty.”

“Nu-uh, you *definitely* are. I get embarrassed just watching you two.”

Ayaka pointed at him sharply with her index finger, but Souji quickly grabbed her hand and said, “Don’t point at people like that,” as he lowered her hand. *They’re so comfortable with each other.* Amane sighed silently at the scene.

“...It’s not like I do it on purpose,” said Amane as he watched the two of them, answering her question.

“So you two are flirting on a daily basis, then?” Souji deduced. “That’s impressive.”

“Oh, hush.”

“You say that, but that’s probably the reason why he decided to work part-time for Shiina-san in the first place,” Ayaka chipped in, sharing her perspective. “I say it’s amazing that he’s able to act with their future in mind.”

“...Ah, so that’s why you suddenly decided on a part-time job. It was for Shiina-san’s sake. I didn’t mark you as someone who’s comfortable serving customers, Fujimiya, so I thought it was strange at first. That explains it.”

Souji nodded in understanding, seemingly making a mental note of an important new fact. Ayaka looked a little awkward following that, perhaps because Amane hadn’t explained it to her—or rather, because he’d kind of asked her not to tell others too much about it.

Ayaka was likely thinking right now that she had broken her promise by mentioning that Amane was doing it for Mahiru’s sake. However, he was going to be working with Souji at the same place, and it wouldn’t be long before he would be questioned about it, even if he did try to keep his reasons hidden, doing so would be pointless in the long run. As long as Ayaka and Souji didn’t reveal it to Mahiru, Amane had no issues with these two knowing.

“Keep it a secret from Mahiru, ’kay? I wanna surprise her.”

“*E–xa–ctly*,” said Ayaka. “You mustn’t tell anyone, Sou-chan.”

“Ayaka. You let it slip, didn’t you?”

“*Ouch!*” Tears in her eyes, Ayaka clutched her forehead as Souji flicked her with a helpless look. He then gave Amane, who was taken aback, an awkward smile.

“Well, if that’s the case, then I understand. If there’s anything I can do to help, I’ll do what I can,” offered Souji.

After a brief moment of silence, "...Thank you," Amane offered his gratitude.

"I should be the one thanking you, man. Thanks for becoming friends with this knucklehead here." Souji said, as he tilted his head towards Ayaka.

"*...Hmm?* How odd! Wasn't *I* supposed to be the one engineering a new friendship for *you*, Sou-chan…? As a matter of fact, I hope you realize that I'm not some kind of pathetic girl that you need to worry about in the first place?"

"But you tend to spill all kinds of secrets when you talk, Ayaka."

"That's so mean!!"

Ayaka pouted angrily at the way Souji worded his comment, and she playfully pounded on his chest, which according to her, was 'amazing when undressed.' Watching them, Amane felt a warmth rise up in his chest.

"Oh, and about the part-time job, Auntie mentioned that you'll need to wait a bit before starting, apparently a week or two. She needs to sort out the shift schedule and your uniform, stuff like that."

The couple's mini romcom skit had settled down, and they resumed having lunch, though that last bit came out of Ayaka in a hushed tone, like she had just remembered something vital.

Since Amane hadn't submitted his signed contract to Fumika yet, she didn't know his phone number or any other kind of contact information. Therefore, it seemed that she had no choice but to entrust Ayaka with any messages for Amane.

Even Ayaka, peculiar as she was, knew not to hand over Amane's contact information without his permission. So even now that procedures for the job were almost done and over, she still had to play the role of messenger.

"That's fine." Amane assured. "I wasn't expecting to start immediately, anyways. By the way, about the uniforms…"

"Oh, they're not like the ones we had at the café we hosted the other day. Your uniform will be more on the simple side, like the typical outfit that waiters wear. The women's ones are simpler, too. They're not frilly at all, so don't worry."

"To be honest, I was wondering what I'd do if the clothes were on the flashy side."

Since Fumika had chosen to meet Amane on a day the café was closed, seemingly on purpose, he didn't know what their uniforms looked like. But he was relieved to know that it was something he didn't need to worry about.

Though his uniform at the cultural festival was relatively unadorned, it was still somewhat flashy. Potentially wearing something similar on a daily basis would have proven tough, even if it was for his job.

But his personal preference wasn't the main issue. More than anything, if he was caught in a flashy outfit by one of his friends while on shift, it would only spell trouble. Amane's head hurt just thinking about it. He had been swept along by the excitement of the cultural festival, and since he knew it was only for a mere two days, he wore the uniform he was given—but he still felt a little reluctant to imagine wearing something like that on a regular basis.

Thank goodness, Amane was relieved. *They're just regular waiter clothes.* Then, as if something suddenly struck her, "Oh, wait a minute—" Ayaka exclaimed abruptly.

"—Uh, I told her your size, Fujimiya-kun. Was that okay?"

"I'm cool with it, but how'd you find it out?"

"I remember it from the outfit you wore at the cultural festival, and I can tell just by looking," Ayaka explained, grinning all the while. "I can more or less determine the size of a boy's body, even when covered by clothes," she added, so perhaps it was a technique born from her passion for muscles.

"Just come out and say it honestly—that you're clearly a pervert," Souji remarked rudely as he listened in from the sidelines, not even trying to mask his annoyance.

"You're *so* mean!" Ayaka shot back, now starting to sulk. "Seriously, geez. …Ah, and just to clarify, while I can piece together the general idea by looking, it's not like I can figure out the quality or density of their muscles without touching them… N-Needless to say, though, I won't sexually harass anyone, okay? I only inspect in detail when given consent."

"S-So you say… Well, I'm glad it saves me the trouble of telling you my size… I guess?"

"Ayaka, look, you're scaring him off. Fujimiya, you don't have to force yourself to go along with this girl, just so you know."

"It's not nice to call someone '*this*'." Ayaka made a cute show of getting angry, but when she met eyes with Amane, she frowned awkwardly, looking troubled. "I'm sorry about that. I showed you a weird side of me."

"Huh? Don't be. It's nothing new…"

"Ugh… that sure stings. But I can't say anything in my defense… I've been acting like this since the cultural festival, after all. As if it was totally

normal, too…”

“Uh—well, that’s true. It’s obvious that you have different hobbies from the people around you, Kido, and I understand that. But I wouldn’t say I have any particular issue with it… Well, not unless that hobby brings harm to anyone else, anyway. Everyone has their own preferences and interests. I wouldn’t consider it creepy, nor would I criticize you for it.”

It would be a different story if Amane fell victim in some way due to those tastes, but as long as no problems arose, he had no intention—or any right, for that matter—of kicking up a fuss about it. It’s a given that everyone has their own preferences, and as long as it doesn’t harm others, they ought to be respected. In the first place, Amane couldn’t recall being raised to exclude others simply because they were different from him.

What’s more, Amane couldn’t shake the feeling that Mahiru was slowly but surely developing a muscle fetish of her own behind the scenes, so he couldn’t completely write it off as someone else’s problem. Perhaps it would be appropriate for him to complain about Ayaka’s influence in the matter, but since Mahiru was enjoying herself and it resulted in her liking more aspects of him, then it ought to be a good thing… probably.

Sure, Amane had no intention of rejecting or shaming Ayaka’s intense muscle fetish, since he considered that the things that make Ayaka happy were none of his business, but it was only natural to feel a little uneasy about it.

“I don’t even have the right to complain about others in the first place,” murmured Amane as he grabbed Mahiru’s homemade *dashimaki tamago* with his chopsticks. Ayaka, overcome with emotion, patted Amane on the shoulder with a wide smile.

“You really had a good upbringing, Fujimiya-kun! You’re such a good guy. I can see why Shiina-san fell for you!”

“...Ayaka.”

“What are you getting jealous of, Sou-chan? I only have eyes for you, so don’t worry…”

“No—I mean, that’s fine and all, but that’s not what I meant. It’s just that Fujimiya looks devastated…”

Due to the slap on his shoulder, Amane’s *dashimaki tamago* slipped out from between his chopsticks and fell right into the sweet-and-sour meatball sauce made from yesterday’s leftovers.

In a stroke of good fortune, it hadn’t fallen onto the picnic blanket or his

clothes. But for someone like Amane, who preferred to savor the delicate combination of seasonings used for his egg dish, the change in flavor seemed to give his system quite the shock. He was frozen in place for a few moments, and Souji had taken that to be him in low spirits.

"S-Sorry! I didn't mean to!" Ayaka panicked as she saw Amane staring at his *dashimaki tamago* covered in sweet-and-sour sauce.

"N-No, it's not a problem. I can still eat it. It didn't touch the ground or anything, and this sauce is pretty delicious, too…"

"You're totally devastated! I'm so sorry! I'll get down on my hands and knees and ask Shiina-san to make some more for you later!"

"N-No need. It's all good."

In truth, Amane wasn't all that bent out of shape about it, but with Ayaka apologizing so earnestly, he smiled encouragingly back at her in return. Even so, she still bowed her head for some reason, looking incredibly apologetic.

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"You really are fond of your *dashimaki tamago*, aren't you, Amane-kun?" Mahiru grinned.

Seemingly up-to-date on the whole Ayaka situation, Mahiru smiled and commented on it, the first chance she got. With neither of them having plans to go out after school, they were walking home together as they usually did, side-by-side. While deciding what they should eat for dinner, Mahiru mentioned what Ayaka had told her. "I was delighted to hear about it," she continued.

Mahiru giggled away, clearly amused by Amane's reaction, but since she laughed in an elegant way, she attracted the gazes of nearby onlookers and they quickly turned to look in her direction.

Amane squeezed their linked hands, trying to get her to stop laughing unnecessarily, but her grin didn't seem to subside. He had the urge to pinch Mahiru's cheeks, but given the fact that he was holding her bag in one hand, and holding her hand with the other, he wasn't able to.

"I put them in your bento often, do I not? I gave you the leftovers this morning, and I sometimes serve it for dinner too, you know?"

"I get that you make it for me all the time, but I was really looking forward to enjoying it properly at that moment." Amane was a tad sulky in

his reply.

“Geez. Thanks to that, Kido-san apologized to me with a really serious look on her face, and she even begged me to make another one for you.”

Ayaka seemed to feel responsible for what had happened, and she apologized earnestly, going as far as to bow her head in front of Mahiru.

However, Amane didn’t want to pin the blame on Ayaka. He was the one who felt a little down over something so insignificant, and to begin with, it hadn’t even dropped on the floor. A minor change in taste was all it was.

He hadn’t anticipated that Ayaka would actually go and apologize, and he had been told that she had done so while Amane wasn’t around. Now he felt bad, given how far Ayaka went to try and make amends for something like that.

“I feel sorry for Kido, to be frank. I think I’ve done her an injustice—I just went and got a little disheartened on my own.”

“I was told you had a very serious look on your face, Amane-kun.”

“Well, I mean… that was *your dashimaki tamago*, Mahiru.”

“I can make it for you anytime you like.”

“...Even for dinner?”

“We only just decided on what to eat, but you already want to change the menu? It can’t be helped, you can be so fickle at times,” said Mahiru, acting a little exasperated. “Good grief.” Despite that, her voice sounded cheerful and somewhat lively, so she didn’t appear to mind.

She gave him a tender smile as she treated him like a child, and Amane, feeling a little embarrassed, focused his attention on keeping that from showing on his face.

“Okay. Let’s have some *dashimaki tamago* for dinner tonight, then. But in return, I’ll have you pamper me to my heart’s content.”

“Really? If that’s all you want, then by all means. I’ll do it even without you asking.”

If Mahiru, who was fundamentally a well put together woman, wanted Amane to fawn all over her, he would gladly accept—in fact, he wanted to do it whether she asked him or not. One could even say that spoiling Mahiru had become one of his hobbies.

Amane had agreed to it without a second thought, and Mahiru, who had proposed the idea in the first place, flinched.

“...That would be troublesome in its own way,” she said.

“Why’s that?”

“That’s… because you don’t know how to hold back, Amane-kun.”

“*Hold back?* Was I being that rough?”

“I wouldn’t call it rough, but… It’s just that, when you decide to spoil me, you go all out…”

“Yeah, gotta honor my promises.”

As someone who saw things through to the end once he decided on something, unless there was a compelling reason not to, Amane was more than willing to dote on Mahiru as much as she wanted, if she so wished.

While he wouldn’t do anything that would make her uncomfortable, he thought it appropriate to indulge her enough to make her melt with delight.

“...I always end up in a predicament when you go too far with your pampering,” Mahiru moped, before whispering, “My legs get all weak and I struggle to stand.”

Amane couldn’t help but chuckle at Mahiru. When it came to pampering, he never went further than kissing or hugging, but Mahiru seemed to find even that level of intimacy challenging.

Amane often witnessed firsthand how she would become limp and melt when he spoiled her excessively, but Mahiru herself didn’t enjoy being like that.

If he mentioned how cute she was being, she would blush faintly and whisper, “That’s because you keep going at it without stopping,” in a cute, sulky, yet spoiled voice.

“Anyway, try not to go overboard with your pampering,” Mahiru urged. “Please treat me as you usually would.”

“You say that, but I’ve always done it the way that’s normal for me.”

“...So this is the technique passed down through the Fujimiya bloodline…”

“I’m not nearly as good at it as my dad is, though.”

As one would expect, Amane hadn’t acquired the same high-level pampering skills and techniques as his father, and couldn’t do it as naturally as he did. To Amane, Shuuto was an incredibly kind and gentle person, very affectionate toward his family.

Shuuto never pampered his family excessively in a way that would affect their physical or mental well-being like some kind of poison. It wasn’t that simple. Instead, he paid close attention to his family, more so than anyone else, and knew when to distance himself and gently watch over them when they needed it the most. He would pamper them in a way that was beneficial

to them, and always offered the deepest love he could muster.

As far as Amane was concerned, he wanted to be a little more reserved and calmer than his father was, but the way Shuuto treated his family was one of Amane's ideals, and Amane aspired to be like him.

In Amane's opinion, Mahiru had a strong sense of self-discipline and tended to put up a tough front, so he felt that if he didn't spoil her from time to time, she ran the risk of pushing herself until she breaks. Amane, between his attempts to try and melt her heart, tried to spoil her in moderation, but Mahiru seemed to take even that as too much affection.

"I would love to see Shihoko-san hear you say that line, Amane-kun," Mahiru noted. "It's a shame that she is no longer here."

"Why are you bringing up Mom? …Well, it's no surprise, given that she needed to go back home."

Considering that his parents had to go to work tomorrow, it was only natural that they had already set off.

Things had been quite lively due to the cultural festival and the subsequent day off, so now that he was reminded of his parents leaving, he felt surprisingly aware of the contrast of them not being here.

"I'll miss them," Mahiru mumbled.

"I'm sure. You looked like you were having a whale of a time when Mom and Dad came, after all."

"Of course I had lots of fun. I got to hear old stories about you too, Amane-kun."

"...Perhaps a special, extra-large serving of pampering is in order," Amane teased, seeking playful revenge.

"Huh? Th-That's a little…"

Mahiru panicked after hearing Amane's chosen method of payback, who had decided to thoroughly pamper her in efforts to reveal what his parents had told her. But Mahiru had brought this upon herself, given her slip of the tongue.

If Amane remained unaware, he would have been more lenient in his pampering, but that ship had already sailed.

Now, how shall I get back at her…?

Amane smiled evilly, devising the best ways in which to make her give in and spill the beans, and Mahiru's face twitched slightly as she headbutted Amane's upper arm until they reached the supermarket.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

"...E-Erm, you see, Amane-kun…, I believe you ought to go easy on me."

After dinner, Mahiru looked up at Amane with a bright red face as he carried out the *extra-large serving of pampering*.

They were only sitting on the sofa together, with Amane petting her, but Mahiru was terribly embarrassed. He hadn't even touched her in a particularly sexual way or anything, but her face was boiling—perhaps because he had been looking at her face while patting her on the head, or because she'd been leaning against him while resting on his lap.

"You say I need to go easy on you, but you *still* haven't told me what you heard from my parents," Amane taunted, applying some pressure.

"L–Like I have been saying, there were no stories of your past that you need to worry about!"

"And the specifics are?"

"...Like when you were little, you were swinging too hard on the swings, flew off, and then cried. Or how you tried to kiss Shihoko-san on the cheek but put too much force into it and headbutted her by accident…"

"*Aaand that's out*. I shall spare no mercy with your pu–nish–ment."

"No way...!"

As a child, Amane often got too caught up by his mother's enthusiasm, which resulted in him also getting carried away and making mischief, but just the thought of Mahiru finding out about it was so embarrassing that he considered it a form of fresh punishment for him.

Especially when the story of kissing one's mother on the cheek as a child was something nobody should ever bring up with a man. That topic was the epitome of one's dark history.

It was clear that compared to Mahiru, who was in the middle of being doted on, Amane was much more embarrassed, having his past deeds exposed, and worse yet, it had almost escaped his notice.

Kissing his mother was only a failed attempt to begin with, so that was a non-issue. However, since this was Shihoko they were talking about, it wouldn't be surprising if she went in for some cheek rubs or kisses herself, so Amane wanted to dance around the subject, otherwise it would give him a headache.

Rather than tell her not to ask needless questions, Amane slid his finger along the side of Mahiru's body, tracing it with the softest of touches. Mahiru

shuddered and her cheeks trembled as she looked up at him.

She was probably begging him to stop, of course, but Amane had no intention of stopping as this was her 'punishment'. He assumed that Shihoko was the one who brought up the topic in conversation, but there was no mistaking that Mahiru must have listened in with keen interest.

You're guilty by association, was the message Amane conveyed as he moved his fingers gently and tenderly across her body.

Mahiru was far too sensitive to tickling, so he held back as he did so, but she let out a scream in a higher pitch than usual and clung onto Amane tightly. She didn't try to run for it, likely because she would have lost her balance.

"*Eek… Fuah*—I-I'm sorry!"

"...Anything else you've heard?"

Wanting to wring out all of the unnecessary tales that Shihoko had told her, Amane decided to try harder to convince her to lay bare all her secrets, and tenderly traced the curves of her waistline, as if teasing her with a feather, prompting Mahiru to squirm and writhe in agony while doing her best to hold back her laughter.

"Th-That was all she told me this time!"

"*This time…,*" Amane zeroed in on her wording.

"I-It's just a figure of speech…"

"...Even if you really have told me everything, I get the feeling you're planning to hear more of such stories from now on, young lady. Don't you think it's unfair that only *my* dark history is being revealed?"

"B-But, well, that's because… I had more pressing worries than a dark history back then…"

"Well, when you put it that way, there's clearly nothing more I can say," conceded Amane, stopping his tickling.

Amane may have accidentally reminded her of some unpleasant memories. Mahiru viewed her childhood as a time when she received neither love nor protection from her parents, so it was probably a topic she preferred to remain untouched, and a topic that he tried his hardest to not remind her of.

Feeling apologetic for bringing up the topic, Amane frowned worryingly and looked at Mahiru, she smiled back faintly as if she had seen through Amane's train of thought.

"It's okay. You don't have to worry about that," Mahiru tried to reassure

him, “It’s not that important to me anymore, and I’m satisfied with how things are now. That’s all that matters.”

“Mahiru…,” Amane called out her name worryingly.

“Besides, I was an obedient child at the time, so I wasn’t as mischievous as you were, Amane-kun.”

“Well excuse me for being so troublesome,” Amane said in response to her teasing. “…True though, I can’t imagine you acting like a tomboy, Mahiru.”

He pulled on her cheeks in retaliation as he tried to imagine what Mahiru was like when she was little.

Certainly, it was tough to imagine Mahiru having a tomboyish side to her.

It appeared that even from such a young age, Mahiru was on her best behavior trying to get acknowledged by her parents, which meant she must have been a lot quieter and more compliant than she was now. It was much easier to imagine a Mahiru that kept to herself, so Amane was curious to see what a more tomboyish Mahiru would have been like.

...I wonder if I’ll be able to see something like that if we have a child that resembles Mahiru.

Amane had a feeling that their child would grow to be sensible no matter which parent they took after, but he wouldn’t know until the child was born.

Whether their child would be sensible, tomboyish, or mischievous, they would be cute in their own way. Rather than resemble the unendearing Amane, he would absolutely prefer them to grow up in Mahiru’s image.

If Itsuki caught wind of this, he’d say, “Ain’tcha getting ahead of yourself there, bud?” Amane imagined the situation in his head as Mahiru buried her face deep into his chest while smiling to herself, rubbing her cheeks against him.

“...I wasn’t very cute when I was little, you know?” she cleared up. “I was just trying to be a good girl so that my parents would praise me. It paid off in a way, since I was able to do a lot of things for my age, but in the end, people still talked about me behind my back about me lacking any charm.”

“*By who?*”

“I wonder. The mother of a child who happened to be playing with me at the time, perhaps.” Mahiru answered, before noticing something.

“...Amane-kun, your face. Mind your face.”

“But—I mean…”

Amane couldn’t believe people would speak ill of a child when they were

within earshot, so he subconsciously scowled in offended horror, after which Mahiru tried to calm him down.

He had plenty of things he would like to say to that unknown mother who revealed her negative thoughts far too easily, despite the fact that children were especially vulnerable to being hurt. But regardless of what he thought, since it was a thing of the past, there was really nothing he could do.

Luckily, Mahiru didn't appear to be brooding over the situation, and instead, she looked like she was taking the memory in stride, but Amane was still irked at the thought of it leaving a lasting scar on her emotionally.

"You don't have to worry about me," Mahiru tried to assuage Amane's anger. "Koyuki-san would praise me for being cute at any chance she got."

"Koyuki-san, *good job!*"

While giving a thumbs-up to Mahiru's stand-in parent in his mind, who he had yet to be introduced to, Amane petted Mahiru's head and embraced her as she recalled moments from deep within her past.

"I was more okay with it than you might think, Amane-kun. It was much tougher for me to hear something like that from my own parents than from a random stranger."

"...Mahiru."

"I don't want to dwell on sad moments from the past, so let's leave it at that. But one thing I can say for sure is that despite suffering hardships in the past, it was because of those experiences that I was able to meet and grow closer to you like this, Amane-kun." Mahiru smiled at him, "I don't want to deny that past, so please don't look at me like that."

Mahiru laughed, calling him a worrywart, and Amane pressed his lips against her forehead and hugged her again. She wriggled around in his embrace before relaxing herself and planting a kiss directly onto his lips.

"...And besides, I'm fine now that I'm loved by you, Amane-kun," Mahiru followed up.

Seeing Mahiru blushing shyly up close, Amane muttered, "You're such a cutie." Now determined to spoil her even more, he lightly gave her yet another kiss and caressed her hair.

Mahiru leaned against Amane and stared at his face with a dreamy look in her eyes. Willingly at Amane's mercy, she welcomed his kind of pampering with open arms.

As he foresaw himself getting lost in the moment and showering Mahiru with even more affection, Amane reminded himself to exercise some restraint

and avoid getting carried away. Just as he did so, he remembered something he'd forgotten to tell her.

"I'll let you know now before I forget again, but once I start working, I'll definitely be coming home late on weekdays," he informed. "So feel free to have dinner without me."

I should've told her a little earlier. Amane stopped stroking Mahiru's head for a moment once he told her, but as he spoke, her large eyes blinked in surprise as she was still nestled within his arms.

"We're still deciding on the shifts, but I'll be staying there until they close up, at least on weekdays. I'm expecting to be home around nine o'clock, and I can't let you wait that long for me."

"I don't mind waiting if it's only until then," Mahiru replied steadfastly.

Amane planned to have Mahiru eat before him, since it'd be a bad idea to have her wait for him while she starved. However, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, she responded that she would gladly wait.

Amane, unable to do anything other than look utterly confused, stared at her with an expression that said, *What're you talking about?*

"No, no. You'll just get hungry," Amane reckoned.

"I would rather fill my heart than my stomach, so I will wait for you, Amane-kun. It wouldn't be any fun if I had to eat alone, so I don't mind the wait at all."

"I'll be really late, you know?"

"Compared to the plenty of other people in clubs and other part-time jobs, it is not that late. …Or do you mean that you don't *want* me to wait?"

"Of course that's not what I mean," Amane shut down any potential misunderstandings. "I just don't want to keep you waiting."

Amane felt bad for creating a situation where she had to cook dinner and then quietly wait by her lonesome. He figured it would be beneficial for her health if she simply ate before him, but Mahiru showed no sign of relenting.

"It's not like I would be sitting around doing nothing while I wait, you know? If I must wait, there are plenty of things I can do in the meantime: taking a bath, working on assignments, reviewing material for classes, or cleaning up," Mahiru listed off her tasks, trying to prove her point. "I have lots to do, all that will change is the order in which I do them."

She didn't seem particularly bothered and simply smiled. "You really are such a worrywart," she said, poking at his cheeks. "Since you're going to work hard for that *something* you really want, how could I not support you?

Well, I say that, but all I can do is prepare warm meals and a bath for you."

"I'm incredibly grateful, even just for that," Amane asserted. "…But what I look forward to the most is for you to welcome me home when I return. That alone would really make my day."

"If just seeing me will cheer you up, then it's a small price to pay."

"...But you don't have to force yourself, okay?" Amane insisted. "You better take care of yourself first and foremost, alright?"

Knowing Mahiru, she'd prioritize me even if she has something to do, Amane noted, but Mahiru dismissed his suggestion with a laugh.

Although Amane had no intention of constraining Mahiru, she appeared to be against the idea of eating in his absence and showed no signs of bending her will. That was just how much she loved and cared for him. Amane was delighted, of course, but still couldn't shake off the feeling that he wanted her to not push herself too much.

"That goes for you as well, Amane-kun. Please don't force yourself to work too hard, okay?" Mahiru advised. "I don't know what it is that you want, but you are the type who sees something through to the end once you've decided on something, so I am worried for you."

"I won't overdo it. After all, I can't make you worry, Mahiru. That's not what I want to accomplish here," Amane assured.

"I was worried just with you working part-time, but…" Mahiru trailed off. "You're not exactly known for being a social butterfly, Amane-kun."

"That's spot-on, but also a little rude."

While that was true and Amane would admit it to both himself and others, he'd predictably be left wondering how to react if someone pointed it out to him directly.

Upon hearing Amane grumble, "It's not like I have *no* social skills," in a way that didn't refute what she'd said, Mahiru sighed softly.

"Rather than having no social skills, I find it more appropriate to say that you don't actively involve yourself in social situations more than is necessary. I believe you can do it if you put your mind to it, Amane-kun."

"Well, it's not like I'm trying to get along with a truckload of people—I am satisfied with a small circle of friends," replied Amane.

"...But, you really *can* do it if you try, can't you? You *are* able to flip that social switch in your mind, aren't you?" Mahiru sighed, blurting out her words hurriedly.

"Why are you sighing?"

"...I'm just worried what I'd do if you became popular, Amane-kun…"

Amane couldn't help but chuckle a little at his girlfriend's downright adorable worries, and Mahiru looked up at him with a somewhat miffed expression once she heard his laughter.

"You don't need to worry. I'm not at all popular," said Amane, trying to ease her concerns.

"You aren't conscious of what people think of you recently, Amane-kun."

"Listen here. Going by its atmosphere and the pricing on its menu, the customers at our café are supposedly dandy old gentlemen and refined old ladies. Popular or unpopular—it makes little to no difference."

Younger clientele would prefer the chain stores, in which they'd be able eat and drink comfortably despite the somewhat boisterous atmosphere, over a placid, privately owned café like the one Amane worked at. And after having seen the prices of items on the menu, he could attest that it was a little out of budget for the average high school or college student casually looking to enjoy a cup of tea.

That being the case, the taste of food and drink in the café was of high quality, and the calm atmosphere made it popular among elderly visitors. That said, to a certain extent, the fact that the owner of the café was a beautiful lady was reason enough for some older men to frequent her establishment.

As mentioned by Souji, the café rarely saw young girls as customers, which Amane was relieved by, given that he'd be able to work in peace. As such, even if he *did* become somewhat popular, it'd be with someone who was a lot older than he was—a generation or two older, in fact, in which case it would be more like being treated like a favored son or grandson, as opposed to being popular.

"Thus, there's nothing for you to worry about, Mahiru. The owner seemed like a friendly person, too."

"...If so, then fine," she replied a little sulkily.

Mahiru seemed more or less convinced by what he'd said, and Amane patted her head to try and soothe her. Although she still looked a little dissatisfied, she looked happy all the same, ultimately allowing Amane to do as he pleased.

Chapter 6

Pressure from a Friend

“What’re you reading?”

“A handbook for my part-time job. Kido told me that it’d be best if I went over it and learned everything in advance, so she brought it over for me.”

Itsuki approached Amane, having noticed him reading through a binder containing guidelines and instructions for working his part-time job. Ayaka had given it to him, saying, “It’d be best for you to learn this beforehand to help you get ready for work, right?”

Written inside was a compilation of necessary knowledge he needed to learn about his job, including the basics of customer service, the menu, the handling of equipment, the names and the distinct flavor of each type of coffee bean, and so on.

Thanks to getting the hang of some basics during the school festival, it wasn’t too much trouble to memorize how to deal with customers and the contents of the menu. However, it was unexpectedly difficult to get familiarized with the different types of coffee, their taste, and the origin of the coffee beans well enough to explain them to the customers when asked about it, so he had taken to reading through the manual whenever he had time on hand.

“Is it okay to take that kinda stuff outside the shop?” Itsuki asked.

“Apparently it’s fine,” Amane answered. “Because it’s just an explanation on customer service and how to use equipment. Sounds like Kido got permission since it’s not like it’s got trade secrets in it or anything. Besides, it’d be better for me to learn the ropes sooner than later for the cafe too, right?”

Ayaka probably went out of her way to follow up on Amane because she felt responsible for referring him to the job, but he suspected that it also came from her confidence in his ability to memorize everything without much trouble.

He couldn’t very well depend on Souji for everything, who he was simply

supposed to work alongside. Instead, Amane felt that he ought to become a properly trained employee and be of service to the café as soon as possible.

Besides, he couldn't possibly invite Mahiru to come watch him, only to do a sloppy job, so his desire to meet her expectations gave him another reason to diligently read through the manual over and over. Incidentally, Mahiru, who usually spent her breaks with Amane, was nowhere to be seen today, perhaps out of consideration after seeing Amane concentrating.

As Amane resumed committing the lines of text in the manual to memory, Itsuki seemed to be at a loss for words and let out a sigh.

"You're really committed when it comes to stuff like this, huh?" Itsuki noted. "Though I guess it makes sense when you think of it as the power of love."

"Shut up."

His motivations being what they were, Amane really couldn't deny what Itsuki was saying, but having it be pointed out by someone else made his embarrassment boil over, and he instinctively snapped back. But Itsuki just laughed, not bothered in the slightest.

"But man, to think that the once meek and unsociable Amane would change this much… Love really is amazing, huh. It really can change people."

"You've been making fun of me for a while, are you trying to piss me off?"

"No, not at all. It's just that… well, how do I put this... I'm dazzled at how heartwarming it all is."

"Why don't you keep getting dazzled until you go blind? Then I won't have to put up with you coming to watch me work."

"That's so mean! I wanna see how you look when you're working hard, too!"

"You're really saying that, when you won't even show me where you work yourself?"

Though Itsuki was making fun of him, Amane knew that Itsuki had a part-time job as well. However, he didn't know where he worked, or what he did. Itsuki was usually candid and open-minded, but for some reason, he didn't bring up the topic of his work very often at all.

While he didn't go so far as to keep it an absolute secret, it felt like Itsuki didn't want to touch on the issue that much either, so Amane didn't intend on digging too deep, but maybe prying a little would be fine.

When he looked up from the manual and turned to his friend, Itsuki chuckled and avoided the topic, saying, “What, me? Well…”

“You say you want to come see me working at *my* part-time job, but you haven’t even told me where *you’re* working part-time, let alone give any thought to taking me along with you, right?”

“Nyahaha, well, it’s not like I had any obligation to tell you, so…”

“I mean, I won’t deny that, but in that case, it makes me worry that you might be taking on something shady.”

“No way I would!” Itsuki blurted.

“Then at least tell me this. What kind of work are you doing?”

“*Whaaat?* Well, I guess I could tell you… I’m working at a flower shop. An acquaintance of mine owns the store…”

“.....Flowers? You?”

Itsuki looked awkward as he faced Amane, who couldn’t help but widen his eyes at the unexpected line of work that Itsuki had just confessed to.

“And there it is,” Itsuki anticipated Amane’s response. “I didn’t say anything about it because I knew you would react that way. I knew people would say that it doesn’t fit my image.”

“I’m not saying it’s completely unlike you, but…… You’ve never talked about flowers before.”

“In what situation would I just start talking about flowers? In the first place, it’s not like I’m an expert yet. …What it comes down to is that even this job was only barely approved by my father, since dealing with flowers is related to learning the art of *kadou*. He refused to give me permission to get a part-time job anywhere else.” [5]

Itsuki’s frustration, as well as who it was directed at, was plain to see from the way he scoffed, and so wrinkling his brows was all Amane could do in response.

The rules at Amane’s school stipulate that if a student wanted to get a part-time job, they first needed to get the consent of a guardian and submit the paperwork before starting.

Fortunately, Amane was easily able to get permission from Shuuto, so he was able to take care of the procedures in short order, but in Itsuki’s case, Daiki had the final say on whether he would be allowed to work or not, and Itsuki’s father was nowhere near as cooperative.

Even from Amane’s point of view, he was an unusually strict man, and he had a feeling that Daiki wouldn’t be very supportive of the idea of a student

getting a part-time job, insisting that a student's job is to study. According to Itsuki, he did not in fact allow him to work at first. "Even after much compromising, it was a struggle to get him to agree, you know?" Itsuki grumbled.

Amane thought that it may be better off not asking exactly what kind of trouble Itsuki had to go through to get his father to fold, as Itsuki continued.

"I mean, it's not like I have a problem with working with flowers per se… It's just… I hate being told what to do for every little thing. Like, I'm in high school, you know? Why's he complaining about me earning some pocket change of my own? To top it all off, the manager knows my father so he gets reports on how I'm doing anyways. Well, the manager sympathizes with me so I'm sure he keeps the reports harmless."

"Do you have something you want to buy so badly that you went through all that, just to work a part-time job?" asked Amane.

As far as Amane was aware, Itsuki wasn't much of a spendthrift, nor was he the type to spend an unreasonable amount to have fun. He went out for fast food and karaoke from time to time, but other than that, Amane hadn't seen him obviously stacking up expenses. In the first place, Itsuki seemed to get a fairly generous amount of allowance, even when taking his lunch fees into account.

Amane thought that if he was working on top of that, he must have been planning on buying something fairly expensive, but Itsuki simply shook his head.

"Nah, I'm saving up so I can get out of my parent's house if push comes to shove."

"...Wow… Sorry."

Amane realized that he touched upon a subject he shouldn't have, so he apologized right away, but Itsuki only gave him a bittersweet smile in return.

"I didn't talk about it because I knew you'd end up apologizing like that. Well, in the end, this is just me being stubborn, and if you told me I'm being a bit too hasty, I wouldn't be able to deny it."

"......Are things still that bad between you and Daiki-san?" Amane asked in a low voice after checking to make sure that Chitose wasn't in the classroom.

Fortunately, as their classmates were chatting away, Itsuki was probably the only one to hear Amane's question.

He had lowered his voice because he was worried that Chitose would learn of their conversation through their classmates, but Itsuki just gave a carefree-looking smile at Amane's tactfulness. As he understood that Itsuki's smile was not one of happiness, but of trouble instead, Amane could hardly bear to watch his expression.

"Nothing's changed much, you know?" Itsuki answered. "Well, since I went pretty wild in my rebellious period between my middle school and high school days, we barely talk to each other anyway."

Maybe it wasn't too surprising, but there seemed to be little conversation going on between them even after they had arrived home, too. Amane was worried that he might have done something unnecessary at the cultural festival and made Itsuki's relationship with his father even more difficult, but from how Itsuki was acting, that didn't seem to be the case.

"As long as we're in school, our parents have full control over our lives, so if they seriously restrict our freedom, I mean, there's not much we can do. Basically it's a case of being better safe than sorry," Itsuki shared.

".....Still, I really don't think that even Daiki-san would do something so inhumane as forcing you to do whatever he tells you to do by holding your tuition or living expenses hostage."

It was true that even the people around him have the impression that Daiki was, to put it harshly, an obstinate man who does not compromise on his convictions, but at the same time, Amane thought of him as a sensible adult with a fairly strong sense of responsibility.

If he had been the kind of person to use such grounds to shut down any argument on his son's part while seizing complete control over every aspect of his life, Amane wouldn't have let the fact that he was an outsider in the matter stop him from directly protesting his heavy-handed ways, but the fact was that despite the occasional restrictions he may place on Itsuki's activities, it never went as far as coercion.

They had simply come to the point where neither would budge from their positions, though they probably would not force their opinions on each other either. More than likely because he understood this, Itsuki let out a deep sigh of exasperation.

"Yeah, my father's stubborn for sure, but I doubt he'd do anything truly cruel as a human being, you know? Though, that being said, something might come up that would leave me with no choice but to get out of there ASAP, and then I'm gonna need some cash no matter what, right? After all, I know

just how hard-headed the old man can be."

"……You've got it hard, too," Amane noted.

"Tell me about it, man. But it's just the way I am."

Itsuki may appear frivolous at a glance, but in reality, he was thoughtful, reliable, and steadfast. He normally spoke quite casually, but Amane knew full well that those words were built upon the agony of many hard times.

The way he refused to bend to his father's will showed that Itsuki, too, was stubborn in his own way. Amane thought, *I guess he takes after his father in that regard,* but there was no way he was going to say that to Itsuki's face right now.

"Hey, hey, what're you guys talking about with all that doom and gloom written all over your faces?" Chitose approached them, and noticed their serious expressions.

"Hm? Ah, just talking about how Amane's got it hard with his part-time job and stuff."

Since Itsuki changed the topic to keep Chitose from picking up on the original conversation, out of respect, Amane followed suit. "Yeah, I put my name down for a bunch of shifts, so…"

"Seriously? If you make Mahirun lonely working all the time, I'm gonna make her fall for me instead, okay?"

"That'd be a problem. Of course I'll make sure I don't end up neglecting her either."

"Very well. Make sure you do so," Chitose said, suddenly acting all high and mighty.

"Just who do you think you are?"

"*Ouch*." Chitose was acting like she was the authority on all things Mahiru, so Amane flicked her on the forehead, and she clung onto Itsuki, crying, "Ikkuuunnn~," pretending to be defenseless. Itsuki gave her headpats, going "there, there," while laughing lightheartedly. It appeared they had succeeded in throwing her off the awkwardness that had been hanging in the air.

Chitose rubbed her forehead and made a cute display of pretending to sulk, even though Amane hadn't put that much force into it, and stuck out her tongue in response to Amane's cold glare.

"*Come ooon*. Don't make that face," Chitose urged.

"It's your fault for getting carried away," replied Amane.

"Come on~, what's the big deal, we're talking Mahirun and me here.

Well, whatever. I'm looking forward to when you invite us to see you at work!"

"I suddenly feel less inclined to invite you guys."

"Why not?! We just want to watch the gallant figure of our friend!"

"Then can you swear you won't make fun of me with a stupid smirk on your face?"

At that, Chitose averted her eyes, and as Amane glared harder at her, she looked anywhere but back at him.

"I don't think I would do…… something… like… that?"

"You really think I'd believe that when you can't even look me in the eyes, let alone answer without wavering?"

"But like~ It's a rare opportunity to have Amane use his professional smile on us. You wanna see it too, right, Yuu-chan?"

"Hahaha, well, yeah."

Yuuta nodded with a gentle smile, having approached before anyone noticed, perhaps having seen Amane's little group gathering. Even Yuuta started to pile on for some reason, leaving a grimacing Amane at a loss as to what he could be thinking.

"You say you want to see my customer service smile, but…… You guys saw it plenty just the other day," Amane stated.

"But you got a buff because you were with Mahirun that time. Plus, we weren't on the side being served then."

"You guys…"

"Come onnn~ What's the harm, right, Yuu-chan?"

"Yeah~"

"Why are you guys so in sync when it comes to stuff like this?" Amane complained. "It's not fair if I'm the only one being put in the spotlight and laughed at, especially with everyone else keeping their job situations hidden… and now that I think about it, Kadowaki doesn't even work anywhere at all because he's busy with track, huh."

As the ace of the track & field team, Yuuta was kept busy by his participation in a sports club, so naturally he didn't have the time for a job. The school's track & field club had a proper and sensible training regimen, instead of the traditional *train 'till you drop* mindset. But even so, to work a part-time job on top of that, even on their rest days, would be pretty grueling. If Amane were in Yuuta's shoes, getting a part-time job would be the last thing he'd think of.

As for Chitose, it seemed that her parents didn't give her permission to work part-time.

Apparently, she got some choice words of reprimand when she asked, being told that she couldn't afford to work part time when her grades were as bad as they were. Amane wasn't going to stick his nose into her business and tell her off or anything, but he silently agreed that her parents had a point.

"Yuu-chan, you'd totally fit right in working at a cafe or something, wouldn't you?" judged Chitose.

"I can easily picture that," Amane chimed in. "Kadowaki's always polite."

"Leaving aside whether I'll actually work or not, isn't it good to smile regularly to lighten the place up?" Yuuta answered while returning a question.

"Well, I guess that's true. When I see you smile, it makes the atmosphere… calmer, I'd say…? Yeah." Amane said, fumbling over his words.

"Why was that a question?" Yuuta quizzed.

"Don't think about it too hard," returned Amane.

Amane suggested the subject be dropped. This was mostly because it felt like a number of people of all kinds, that found themselves around Yuuta, were jealous enough that it was like he was constantly surrounded by ferocious beasts. However, Yuuta really couldn't be blamed for this at all, and there was nothing he could do about it anyways, so it was simply better to not dig too deep into it.

Among their classmates, though the boys' jealousy towards Yuuta had died down recently and the girls were fighting over him a lot less than before, this was really only the case within their own specific classroom. There were plenty of girls from other classes with feelings for Yuuta who approached him romantically, and Amane could keenly feel the troubles that came with being popular, just by watching as a bystander.

If he actually got a job working at a café, he'd be popular even outside of school, and it wasn't hard to imagine girls flocking to him from all over. That was probably another big reason why Yuuta didn't try to get a part-time job.

"Well, despite all of that, I hope you get used to your job quickly so you can invite us to see you at work."

"……So you're dead set on coming too, Kadowaki?"

"Well, yeah, I guess. It's a rare chance to see a new side of our friend,

when he is out there working, so of course we'd wanna go. Isn't that right, Itsuki?"

Itsuki groaned, "Ugh, you're silently putting pressure on me now, too."

Since Itsuki hadn't told Amane where he was working until now, Amane assumed that he hadn't told Yuuta either, and it seemed that was, in fact, the case.

However, apparently Chitose knew where Itsuki worked at least, and only watched Itsuki being subject to the silent pressure of his friends' gazes with an exasperated look on her face, muttering, "Well, Ikkun doesn't even want *me* coming near his job, so..."

"Well duh, you wouldn't wanna be seen acting seriously either, right?!" Itsuki responded.

"Dude, that's like admitting you're never being serious, you sure you wanna admit that?" pointed out Amane.

"Well, I *am* a bit of a slacker, after all~"

"…Sure you are."

Despite his usual carefree attitude, everyone here knew that there was more to Itsuki than that. This applied to Yuuta as well, of course, and so he just shrugged, dropping the issue while flashing a somewhat wry smile at Itsuki. However, his usual smile returned quickly, as he returned his gaze to the others.

"Anyway," Yuuta began again. "I'll be looking forward to watching you working at your part-time job, Fujimiya."

"Your smile's still scary…"

"Hahaha."

Despite his objections, Amane felt Yuuta's silent petitioning not to leave him out, and Amane shuddered a little while trying to get them all to drop the topic, by suggesting that they all put a pin in this conversation until later.

Chapter 7

His First Part-Time Job

A week had passed since Amane's part-time job had been set in stone, and he had received a message from Fumika, the owner, letting him know that his uniform had been prepared and that she'd decided on his shift schedule.

After discussing, they decided that Amane would work three weekdays and one Saturday, for a total of four days per week. As the second year student he was, Amane had to be mindful of his upcoming entrance exams, so he made sure that his work hours would not interfere with his studies. In all likelihood, he'd have a similar schedule to students who participated in extracurricular activities and the like.

With the entrance exams closing in next year, Amane had no intention of cutting any corners with his studies, and his current work schedule seemed to pose no problems.

It's pretty tough to balance everything without making any compromises.

On top of his usual endeavors as a student, Amane had to study hard and make preparations for the upcoming exams, and he now had a part-time job to boot. He used to have nothing better to do with his time before he met Mahiru, so from Amane's point of view, his new schedule was packed to the absolute brim.

He wasn't all that stressed about it, however, since he had a clear goal in mind and was more than prepared to spare no effort to achieve it. He *did* feel busy, but it was outweighed by an even greater sense of fulfillment.

Pumping himself up, he quietly muttered, "Let's do this," as he wrote down his future plans in his schedule.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

"Alrighty then, I'm starting work today, so you can head on home before me."

Today was the first day Amane would begin working, and he notified Mahiru of this after school let out. She looked lonely as she smiled at him.

Although Amane's heart ached slightly at the sight, there was nothing that he could do about it. He had taken on the job in order to secure Mahiru's smile, so he couldn't afford to second guess himself now.

Despite Mahiru not knowing the reason behind his part-time job, she understood that Amane had made a firm decision and was taking the initiative, so she respected his wishes. She didn't want to do anything that would make him hesitate in his decision.

However, her understanding nature only made Amane feel even more anxious.

No doubt she'll feel lonely…

Not only was Mahiru the type to generally put others first, but once she committed, she was extremely attentive, pushing herself hard, and was quick to give in to their wishes over her own, out of concern for them and their circumstances.

While some would label her modesty a virtue, it could easily cause her to stress herself out without her even realizing it, so Amane resolved to be more attentive to her now that he'd started his part-time job.

"Oh, you're starting your job today, Amane? Wow! Good luck!"

As he watched Mahiru's slightly crestfallen face with a tinge of guilt in his heart, Chitose offered him some words of encouragement. It seemed that she was about to leave school with Mahiru.

Perhaps Chitose had noticed that Mahiru was feeling a little lonely, because she had been paying more attention to Mahiru ever since Amane had decided to get himself a job. He appreciated her taking the time to look out for Mahiru, but the occasional furtive glances scared him slightly.

"You'd better not tail me," warned Amane.

"I'd… never do something like that, y'know?" Chitose assured, albeit with a slight delay.

"I can't put my faith in you right now, *especially* with that pause."

Chitose was acting a little suspicious given her almost robotic tone, but Amane figured that if he warned her in advance, she wouldn't go out of her way to follow him.

Chitose wasn't the type to do things people disliked, but her keen curiosity sometimes drove her to attempt to secretly investigate. Knowing that, Amane couldn't take her words at face value. He knew that her actions

resulted in the other person's benefit most of the time, but he'd prefer for her to stay put given that all he'd be doing is working at an ordinary part-time job.

"…You can come visit once I've gotten used to the job, but *please,* wait until then," Amane requested. "I don't wanna let you guys see my customer service skills while they're still clumsy-looking."

"You say that, but you looked like you had the role down perfectly back at the cultural festival," Chitose noted.

"Though, what I did was pretty basic, right? Plus, it was Kido's advice that did the trick, to be honest."

"…Looks like I'll be able to visit your part-time job soon then, Amane-kun," Mahiru chimed in after a moment of silence. "You are a quick learner, after all. I will be looking forward to it."

After stroking Mahiru's cheek, Amane then gently ran his hand through her soft flaxen hair as she tried to see him off with a meek look. Surprised, Mahiru's caramel-colored eyes widened, and Amane's expression softened as he looked at her intently.

"Anyhow, I'll do what I can to get used to it before long, and I'll make it a point to come home quickly," Amane said, trying to reassure her.

"……I am willing to wait no matter how long it takes, but please come back as soon as you can."

"Got it," he said softly. "I'll be looking forward to dinner tonight, so I'm gonna do my best."

Mind you, their classmates were already aware that Amane and Mahiru lived next to one another, but it'd still be embarrassing if their classmates found out they were having dinner together each night as if it was the most natural thing in the world, so they were conversing in hushed tones. Chitose, however, grinned from ear to ear as she stood nearby within earshot, and even Itsuki whistled at them in jest.

In the meantime, Amane opted to give Itsuki a light slap with the back of his hand.

"*Ow!*"

Itsuki pretended to stagger, tumbling melodramatically toward Chitose as he leaned against her. But Chitose, seemingly focused on Mahiru's bashful facial expression instead, theatrically shoved Itsuki away and blurted out, "Ikkun, you're way too heavy," which only inspired a pout from the mischievous Itsuki.

Amane laughed away at the two of them, and soon even Mahiru joined in and giggled along. Now a little embarrassed, Itsuki then began to poke Amane in the side to get back at him.

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Though reluctant to cut their lively conversation short, Amane had left school to make his way on over to his part-time job.

As it was his first day, he had arranged to work with Souji, a schoolmate and senior part-timer. Perhaps Ayaka had a hand in this too, as when they passed each other in the hallway, she smiled and said, “So, please take care of Sou-chan from now on!”

If anything, Amane’s position made it likely for him to be taken care of instead, but he nodded along willingly after seeing Ayaka’s innocent-looking smile.

He and Souji had decided to meet up at the school entrance before heading to the café together, but even after spotting Amane walking up to him, Souji maintained a serene-looking expression, making it tricky to guess what he was thinking.

“I’ll be counting on you starting today,” Souji said.

“Likewise. I’ll probably cause you trouble until I get more experience, though…”

“I’m sure we’ve been causing most of the trouble, actually. Ayaka was quite eager when recommending you.”

“N-No, it’s thanks to her that I found the job in the first place,” Amane attempted to make his gratitude clear. “Whether I feel like I owe her one or not, I wouldn’t get upset with her over something like this.”

Ayaka’s invitation had come at just the right moment. She was able to land him a job at a place with decent pay and a coworker he knew that even worked around his circumstances as a student. Amane felt very grateful for what she’d done.

Ayaka made a request quite typical of her when Amane mentioned that he wanted to do something in return, saying, “Lemme help you build your muscles to Shiina-san’s liking.” Although his face twitched a little at her response, Amane decided to accept that offer of hers.

Amane was at a loss, unsure of whether the fact that he had both Yuuta

and Ayaka as his training coaches was something he could laugh about. For the time being, he was content with the arrangement as long as it led to Mahiru being happy.

Souji lightly ran his fingers through his naturally curly hair and muttered, "I hope so," while sighing. Amane was unsure whether Souji was aware of his exchange with Ayaka or not.

Whatever the case, he seemed to be having a hard time dealing with Ayaka's outbursts. Her love for muscles rang loud and clear even to someone like Amane, who hadn't known her for too long. Souji, being her childhood friend and boyfriend, must've had it a lot worse.

All in all, I'm sure she's a good girl deep down…

Amane understood her to be a friendly, unpretentious girl who happened to also be skillful and kind enough to properly calculate gains and losses, so he wasn't put off, per se, but the struggles of her boyfriend, Souji, were clear as day. Souji seemed to have noticed the look in Amane's eyes, as he sighed even deeper.

While they conversed, Amane and Souji arrived at the station. Though he needed to board the train to get to his job, it was only about two stops away from the nearest station. Since Itsuki and Chitose's houses were even further away, he would probably be able to return home from his shift before Mahiru got tired of waiting. The café wasn't far from the station either, so commuting should be a non-issue.

"Is your house within walking distance from the school, Fujimiya?" Souji asked, watching Amane charge money onto his IC card as he didn't own a commuter pass. [6]

"Yeah. My apartment isn't too far from our school, you see."

"Oh, that's pretty neat. Sounds like you can sleep in with your house being that close to school."

"Well, I do think I've got more leeway when it comes to getting to school, but sometimes Mahiru comes and wakes me up…"

In the past, he'd wake up with enough time to spare if it wasn't a holiday, but since Mahiru started coming over to make him breakfast, he had even more time to spare in the mornings. Although he could wake up without her help, he secretly indulged in the blissful moment of waking up to Mahiru's voice, so he occasionally asked her to wake him up. Since she had often come to his house to make breakfast while he was sleeping to begin with, it didn't seem to increase her workload.

“Color me surprised,” Souji murmured. “I was sure you’d be the super responsible type, Fujimiya.”

“If that’s what you thought, then I must be looking pretty put together these days. I’m actually a total mess, to be honest with you.”

While his personal life had become less chaotic compared to the past, he still relied on Mahiru significantly, so when labeled *responsible*, he couldn’t help but tilt his head. Of course, he didn’t leave everything to Mahiru, and he did what he could on his own, but her burden was still significant.

Although he truly was cautious and considerate now, Amane still considered himself to be somewhat self-indulgent. He’d met Souji during the culture festival, so Amane must have been maintaining a decent appearance at the time to be seen as the responsible type by Souji.

“Our standards of being a ‘total mess’ are two different things here,” reckoned Souji. “If we’re talking about being a total mess, then just look at Ayaka…”

“Kido? A mess?”

“Ayaka looks reliable and organized, right? But at home, she’s really lax and lazes around. Not that I’m one to talk, though.”

“I can’t really imagine that, honestly.”

“Well, Ayaka’s got her act together when she’s out and about, and she’ll even go as far as trying to take care of me instead. But as soon as she lets her guard down, she’ll relax much more than I ever do. She looks independent on the outside, but it’s a different story on the inside.”

“…Sounds like she just wants to be spoiled by you, Kayano,” deduced Amane. “Isn’t it precisely because you’re her boyfriend that she’s acting like that?”

He had seen Ayaka make the occasional careless mistake, but still thought of her as a dependable woman with a strong core and a knack for being considerate. The fact that she didn’t show her relaxed side outside and only showed it to her boyfriend, Souji, must have meant something.

Souji blinked. After thinking for a while, he looked down at the ground with a bashful expression.

“…Wait a second, could that be seen as humble bragging?” he realized. “Sorry.”

“D-Don’t be sorry, I’m not bothered by it…” Amane hesitated.

He averted his gaze, since seeing Souji’s embarrassed expression made him feel awkward as well. He thought that perhaps he had unconsciously

bragged about himself in a similar way, so as his expression tightened in his own shame, he tried to keep his lips from trembling.

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Amane absentmindedly strolled with Souji as they bantered, and in the blink of an eye, they arrived at their workplace: the café. This was Amane's first time working properly like this, and he was briefly somewhat nervous, but Souji, whether intentionally or not, entered the café with Amane in tow without hesitation.

With the sound of a fairly nostalgic bell chiming behind him, Amane set foot inside the café for the first time as an employee. They were greeted by a male employee who appeared to be college-aged. Amane couldn't recall seeing him during his previous visit.

At first glance, he was an older, stylish-looking young man wearing the waiter uniform that Amane would soon be wearing himself.

"Welcome, Kayano-kun. Would this young man be the new recruit we talked about?"

"Yeah. We're on the same shift, so it worked out perfectly."

Souji nodded at the other male employee, who already seemed to be aware of the situation and greeted them both with a friendly smile. Then, he ushered Amane forward and headed for the hallway that led directly into the back of the café. Souji turned his head to look behind him, and Amane followed suit. He caught a glimpse of an older male customer entering the café.

"We've got customers, so we'll go get changed first," Souji informed. "Sorry, Miyamoto-san, we'll greet you properly later."

"Got it," he replied. "See you later, rookie."

Miyamoto, as he was called, playfully winked at Amane, who was carrying himself a little awkwardly due to his nervousness, and then turned his attention to the customer who had just entered. Seeing Miyamoto waving his hand behind his back as they lost the chance to get acquainted, Amane and Souji headed for the employee changing room in the back.

"This locker's yours, Fujimiya. And here's your key. Your uniform's in the locker, so go ahead and get changed."

The owner, Fumika, had apparently entrusted Souji with taking care of

Amane, so Souji handed Amane the locker key and began to change, taking off his blazer. Amane did the same, putting on his work uniform. The prepared uniform, which had been adjusted for his size in advance, fit Amane's body perfectly.

What Amane was now wearing was a relatively simple outfit consisting of a white shirt, black vest, matching waiter's apron and slacks, similar to what the male employee named Miyamoto was wearing when they met earlier. His neck was adorned with a black tie, and although the outfit was more casual than the waiter's uniform he had worn during the cultural festival, it was still a refined and fitting attire for a waiter.

Since he was in a customer service job and couldn't afford to have a gloomy atmosphere, Amane styled his hair in a fresh way to brighten the room, but was anxious about whether it suited the outfit. Checking the full-length mirror in the changing room, he was puzzled by the unfamiliar sight. Souji, on the other hand, was already wearing his uniform and stood with a dignified posture.

Perhaps Souji was already used to wearing the uniform as he looked confident in it, unlike Amane, who couldn't help but feel as if the outfit was wearing him. Souji, who usually didn't seem particularly energetic but somewhat sleepy, now had a slightly more focused expression on his face, probably because he was in work mode.

"…Don't I look strange in this?" Amane couldn't help but feel self-conscious.

"Looks perfectly fine to me. I bet Shiina-san would be delighted to see you in that."

Perhaps Souji already understood that Mahiru was head over heels for Amane, and although his words weren't meant to tease, they were spun playfully.

"I–I don't plan on showing this to Mahiru, for a little while at least…"

"I've got a hunch that Shiina-san'll be disappointed."

"Yep, she already is. I managed to convince her to accept the wait in the end, though."

Amane planned to get used to the job as soon as possible, to limit the possibility of chaos and mistakes, and have her wait until then. He then let out a small bitter smile, and so did Souji.

"Your turn—did Kido enjoy seeing you in your uniform?" Amane prodded in return.

“Ayaka prefers undressing rather than dressing up.”

“*Oh…*”

Quick to understand, the look on Amane’s face showed that he was pretty sure that he understood completely, and Souji could only sigh and smile bitterly in response.

“…It’s not that Ayaka has no interest in seeing me dressed up. It’s just that her fetish gets in the way,” Souji clarified.

“Well, I can’t deny that you’ve got some impressive muscles. Any secret to that?”

Having changed together, Souji had naturally shown his skin, and his muscles were more prominent than one could imagine from just seeing him clothed.

However, his muscles weren’t unnecessarily bulky, but rather, they gave the impression of being well-defined and toned, as if he was carved like an ancient statue in marble. Amane couldn’t help but be impressed.

No wonder Kido fell this hard for him…

Although Yuuta, who had a well-proportioned, athletic body, and Kazuya, who appeared even more well-trained, were comparable, Souji’s physique seemed to possess a different kind of physical beauty.

“Ayaka would be more than happy to give you a better rundown than I could. She’d tell you more than you’d ask for, too.”

“Oh… Yeah, that makes sense…” Amane wholeheartedly agreed.

In fact, Amane could easily imagine her enthusiastically talking about it while swinging her ponytail and smiling with her bright eyes and relaxed expression, which made him involuntarily let out a slightly strained smile.

Ayaka could never hit the brakes once she started talking about something she loved, and she often wanted to teach Amane about the fascination of muscles. However, even Amane had his limits in learning about something that was not his own hobby, and he would appreciate if she could keep it in moderation.

“…Do you feel like working out as well, Fujimiya?”

“Well, I do. It’s better for me appearance-wise to be moderately fit, and I’m willing to bet it’d make Mahiru happy, too… Though that’s because your *little princess* loves teaching her a bunch of stuff.”

“I’m sorry about that. I really am.”

“N-No need, it’s fine—it just gives me another reason to improve myself.”

Souji looked conflicted as he apologized on behalf of his girlfriend for enthusiastically preaching the greatness of muscles, so Amane shrugged his shoulders and waved the topic away with his hand to reassure his friend.

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“Aw, I’m so sorry I couldn’t greet you when you arrived…,” Fumika apologized sullenly.

Amane had been guided by Souji to the kitchen used to prepare light meals for the customers, and had been taught where all the utensils were and how to use them. Then Fumika, who had arrived later, apologized to him with a mildly depressed look on her face.

“I did recall that you were coming today… though knowing that Souji-kun is with you brought me great comfort. But welcome once again, Fujimiya-kun. Your uniform suits you splendidly, which is a delight. Ayaka-san’s suggestion was right on the money.”

“Ayaka’s intuition is always bang on, but that’s what makes it so odd,” muttered Souji softly, and Amane almost laughed, but he held it in, and simply bowed his head to Fumika.

“I will be in your care going forward, and I am excited to work with you,” Amane said politely.

“The pleasure’s all mine, so please take care of me as well,” Fumika returned. “Um… If I may ask, have you had the chance to meet our other staff members yet?”

“Only Miyamoto-san so far,” Souji volunteered. “And he has yet to meet Oohashi-san. I believe she was making coffee behind the counter earlier, so he hasn’t made her acquaintance yet.”

“Shall we begin with introductions, then? We don’t appear to have any pending orders, so now’s the perfect time. After all, you will all be working alongside each other going forward,” suggested Fumika with a gentle smile. She then gestured to Souji, instructing, “Switch places with Miyamoto-san and the other staff out in the front for the time being,” and called out to the other employees, sounding composed as she stood by the doorway.

Souji reassured Amane with a pat on the back, and then went out front to take care of customers.

Replacing Souji in the kitchen were two people: the man named Miyamoto who had been conversing with Souji before, and a woman seemingly in her early twenties who sported a loose and wavy hairstyle of medium length and an impressive height rarely seen in women. She looked to be a college student and exuded an air of maturity, standing at least a fist taller than Chitose. She was likely over one hundred and seventy centimeters tall.

Considering what Souji had said, she was probably 'Oohashi.'

"Oh! You must be the guy Kayano-chan brought in earlier! He *did* say we were gonna get more part-timers soon. Nice to meet'cha!"

The woman smiled casually and approached Amane, scoping him out with interest as she circled around him.

Since she was tall, her face was inevitably close to his when she approached him. Amane couldn't push her away without being rude, as she was both a senior and a woman, so all he could do was grit his teeth in confusion.

Seeing Amane's predicament, Miyamoto sighed in exasperation and grabbed the woman by the scruff of her neck, pulling her away. Amane froze at the sudden turn of events, and while still holding the woman by the scruff of her neck, Miyamoto gave him a refreshing smile.

"Sorry for that—I'm sure it came as a surprise. I'm Miyamoto Daichi, and this *thing* here is Oohashi Rino. If you ever run into any problems, don't hesitate to give us a shout."

"Don't you introduce me like *that!* Believe it or not, *I* am currently running into some problems! Being grabbed like this, I mean!" Rino protested. "Big problems!"

"Then you'd best greet him properly first. The conversation will start from there."

After scolding Oohashi, who looked frustrated, Miyamoto then reluctantly let go of her clothes. She then fixed her disheveled collar and turned to Amane with a friendly smile.

"I'm so sorry for startling you; I'm Oohashi Rino, your senior. That makes you my junior, so feel free to rely on me anytime, Kouhai-kun." [7]

"You're better off *not* relying on her. She often makes a mess of things."

"C'mon, that was uncalled for, Daichi. No need to be so rude," Rino fired back.

"Tell me, how many times is it now that I've had to clean up after you…?

How many times have you caused trouble for our customers?"

"I said I'm working on all of that! And I *am* sorry! It wasn't on purpose!"

"Yes, it wasn't on purpose, and I do admit that it was unexpected, but you do recognize that you cause too much trouble in general, don't you?"

Miyamoto spoke firmly and gently as if speaking to a child, not allowing any rebuttal, and though his words were gentle enough, his eyes weren't smiling. Amane inferred that Oohashi had messed up quite badly given that she struggled to raise her head. Eventually, "I get it already!" She relented with a shout.

What am I supposed to do…

Watching the two bicker, almost like some lover's quarrel, Amane felt unsure of how to react. However, Miyamoto seemed to come to his senses and awkwardly rubbed his cheek, saying, "Sorry, we got carried away and left you out of it."

"Anyways, back on track. We're all fellow colleagues starting today, so let's get along, okay?"

"Yes. Uh, Miyamoto-san and Oohashi-san, right? I'm sorry I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Fujimiya Amane."

"*I see, I see*. Fujimiya-chan, then, huh? Got it, loud and clear."

"…She tends to use '–chan' quite a bit, so just bear with it, Fujimiya-kun."

"W-Well, you can call me whatever you like…"

Amane didn't intend to kick up a fuss about the nickname, but he couldn't help but feel it was a little odd given his age and appearance. Miyamoto sighed at the sorry sight of Oohashi and turned his gaze to Fumika, who had been watching the situation calmly.

"So, what should we have Fujimiya-kun do today?" he asked.

"First, I'd like him to get familiar with the inner workings of the café. It's important for him to learn how to relax and understand the ins and outs of the job before starting any service work," Fumika specified. "It looks like he has already looked over the manual, and with Souji-kun having taught him too, I'd like him to prioritize aligning his knowledge with the actual work environment today. Luckily for us, it's a weekday, so we don't have too many customers yet."

"I'm sorry for all this trouble," Amane offered a preemptive apology.

"No need to apologize. It's rare to find someone who can become an immediate asset, especially when they're just starting out. We have enough

staff today, so there's no need to get ahead of yourself," Fumika tried to comfort him.

"If you ask me whether we have enough staff, Owner, I'd say that's up for debate. It feels like we're barely managing with our current shifts… Well, this café isn't the *largest*, so we've just about managed to keep up, using the current number of employees. …But, that's why having you join us is actually a big help, Fujimiya-kun."

Grinning, Miyamoto patted Amane's shoulder encouragingly, causing Fumika to smile warmly as she watched them.

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Amane rode the elevator up to his apartment, feeling exhaustion weigh heavily on him. His senior coworkers had trained him a great deal, but by the time he got home it was already the time when he'd typically take a bath and go to bed. He couldn't help but let out a long, deep sigh.

Despite only working for around four hours, Amane was utterly exhausted, likely due to the unfamiliar environment and duties. Although he hadn't made any major mistakes (or rather, wasn't entrusted with any tasks that could lead to said major mistakes), first-time experiences and nervousness always went hand in hand.

Fortunately, his coworkers, although quirky, were all kind and helpful toward the inexperienced Amane. The calm and gentle atmosphere made it a very pleasant workplace.

Still, it was tiring all the same.

Exiting the elevator and walking to his apartment with heavier steps than usual, he opened the door as always—only to see Mahiru rushing toward him from the hallway leading to the living room. Noticing her hurried approach, Amane blinked in surprise.

Something happen? She looks to be in quite the rush.

Mahiru responded to his surprised silence with a relieved smile.

"Welcome home, Amane-kun."

"I'm home. You didn't have to come running over like that, though. I'm sorry for making you wait."

He assumed she had been waiting for him to come home all this time. Though he had informed her of when he was bound to return, being alone

might have been disheartening for her. Ever since they started dating, Mahiru had been staying at Amane's place outside of bath and bedtime, so her presence had become the norm. Suddenly being alone would naturally make her feel lonely.

"N-No, it's not like that. I had plenty of things to do while you were away, Amane-kun."

"You mean you had plenty to do, so you weren't lonely?"

"…W-Well, that's a different story."

Amane couldn't help but laugh at Mahiru's blushing face as she looked away. Noticing his laughter, she puffed out her cheeks slightly. Despite the annoyed look she was attempting to pull off, her love shone through in a hint of sweetness.

As Mahiru turned away with a pout, Amane entered the house and took off his shoes without hiding his smile. Heading to the bathroom to wash his hands, he noticed the far light was turned on. When he looked back at Mahiru, she was standing there suddenly seeming in a better mood.

"Would you like to have dinner first? Or perhaps a bath?" she asked.

Mahiru's words, with a slight rephrasing, could have sounded like a newlywed greeting. Amane almost responded in kind without thinking, but managed to hold back in the nick of time. Mahiru was probably unaware of what she'd said, which only made her look even more adorable. Surely, if he told her the words he had swallowed, her cheeks would instantly turn scarlet.

Deciding not to say anything for now, as it might cause her to malfunction, Amane swallowed the urge and simply smiled at Mahiru, who as ever wore a graceful smile, looking like she was perfectly happy entrusting everything to him.

"You must be hungry too, Mahiru. Shall we have dinner first?"

"Sure, then I shall dish up our dinner. I made you some *dashimaki tamago* as a reward for working hard on your first day at your new job."

“Awesome! That’s one sweet reward.”

When Amane came home, the bath and dinner had been readied, and even his favorite dish was prepared. He was certainly living a charmed life.

“*Fufu*. You are easily pleased, aren’t you?”

“It *is* top-notch in my books, after all. It’s always so delicious and you make it to match my tastes, plus there’s the added bonus of it being prepped by you, Mahiru. Of course I would appreciate the hard work. Thanks as always.”

In the first place, it wasn’t a matter of being *easily pleased*. Amane knew full well that it took a great deal of effort for Mahiru to make it specifically for him, and the fact that she made anything for him at all was more than enough, really.

On top of that, it was incredibly delicious, making it a very luxurious reward.

Amane was immensely grateful that she not only cooked for him every day but also took his preferences into account. He was reminded once again that she was a truly invaluable partner.

I gotta repay her for this devotion…

Amane washed his hands and headed for the living room, but out of the blue, Mahiru clung to his back.

He tried to turn around to check her expression, but as she was pressing her face firmly against his back, it was a futile move. All he could tell was that she seemed to be embarrassed.

As Mahiru rubbed her forehead against him, she hugged him tightly, squeezing his stomach.

...Man, good thing I’ve been working out.

Amane chuckled a little, and Mahiru seemed to have noticed this through his breath and the shaking of his stomach, so she slapped his abdomen.

“…I appreciate that you’re grateful, but surprise attacks are off-limits,” Mahiru uttered.

“So if I let you know in advance, can I shower you with praise?” Amane teased. “Is *that* within limits?”

“Th-That would be troubling in its own way!” Mahiru separated from him as she said so. “…One of these days, I *will* turn the tables on you,” she heralded and hurried off into the kitchen with a determined look on her face.

Heh, what a gutsy way of wiggling her way out of that…

Amane quietly chuckled at her brave escape and went back to his room to change.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

"By the way, how did your part-time job go?"

As they ate their dinner, which seemed to have been carefully prepared in line with Japanese cuisine, Mahiru asked with a slightly restless expression, as if she had been worried.

Although she tried not to interfere too much with Amane's decisions, she seemed to be concerned because it was his first day on the job.

"Mm, there were no problems. I mean, I wouldn't be given any big responsibilities on the first day. The seniors seemed like nice people, too, and I think it's a good place to work."

"Is that so… I'm glad. It's good if it's a comfortable place for you to work. I would be worried if it was some kind of black company…"

"Kido recommended it, plus Kayano works there and he hasn't offered a single word of complaint, so I don't think we need to worry about that."

In the first place, Fumika was the one running the business. As her relative, Ayaka would be quick to notice any issues, and she wouldn't have let Souji work there if she did pick up on any bad practices. Hence Amane started the part-time job with a fairly large amount of peace of mind.

Although Ayaka had only recently started talking to him, Amane thought she was a kind girl, despite her habit of trying to teach Mahiru about her peculiar hobbies and fetishes.

As for the owner, Fumika, she was a genuinely kind and modest woman (according to Souji) as long as those around her didn't do or say anything that'd ignite her creative spark. There shouldn't be any issues in working there.

"You don't have to worry; it seems like everything will go smoothly. And they're willing to adjust my work hours to fit my schedule," he continued.

"…I'm happy to hear that. I'm content as long as you are motivated to do your best, Amane-kun. I can only watch over and support you."

"That's more than enough for me. Just being able to come home to a delicious meal and a warm bath makes me happy. Thanks, as always,"

Amane thanked her once more, feeling grateful and fortunate just to receive support in that way.

"…To get to see how you work as soon as possible, Amane-kun, I'll help in any small way I can."

"…Is it really something you want to see that badly?"

Amane responded to her hidden motive in a slightly incredulous tone, and she nodded firmly.

"It's only natural that I want to see how my boyfriend looks while he's at work. And considering the uniform Kido-san showed me when talking about Kayano-san, it seems like it would suit you as well, Amane-kun…"

"You think so…?"

"I *am* looking forward to seeing it, just so you know."

"But it's embarrassing for me. I'm not really up for being seen just yet…"

It wasn't that he disliked the idea entirely, but showing Mahiru a different side of himself than usual made him feel indescribably embarrassed.

However, from Mahiru's perspective, that only increased the appeal. "The *gap* makes it better," or so she said, looking eager to see a side of him that she doesn't usually see, so she was currently playing the waiting game.

"…Though if you really don't like the idea, I can live with your decision," she said.

"It's not that I don't *like* it, but… Is seeing my customer service smile really that appealing?"

"Since it's something you usually never do, it kind of makes me want to see it more."

"I'll do it as much as you'd like if you really wanna see it, Mahiru…"

"…That doesn't count. It would still be a smile reserved for me, so it's not the same."

When she said that, he realized she'd hit the nail on the head. Amane couldn't deny giving Mahiru special treatment, and he had the confidence to give her a smile meant just for her.

"Besides, Amane-kun, I just want to see you working hard."

"…I'll do my best to get used to it as soon as possible," he swore.

Being told that, he had no choice but to try even harder. If his beloved girlfriend wanted to see him working as a full-fledged employee, he would spare no effort.

Not to mention the sooner he got used to it, the more the store would also benefit, and doing so would allow Amane to build up more confidence.

How simple-minded of me to get all fired up with just a word or two from Mahiru, Amane mocked himself, but the slight sparkle in her eyes and her expectant smile melted away his self-conscious criticism.

Chapter 8

A Senpai's Secret Worry

Gradually getting used to the unfamiliar environment, Amane was able to manage certain parts of the job within a week's time. Fundamentally, his main role was to take and deliver orders to the customers. He wasn't required to prepare the orders that those customers placed, which came as a relief for Amane, who was well aware of his own inexperience.

While he hadn't been given the chance to brew the coffee for customers just yet, other staff had been teaching him how to prepare it in the back when business was slow. This café was rather particular about the coffee they served, not allowing any amount of compromise regarding its taste.

Amane had been told that the ideal temperature of the hot water and the time spent extracting the flavor varied depending on the type of coffee bean used, and how finely said beans were ground. The taste provided to customers had to be consistent, so he practiced until he could recreate it.

Once Amane got the extraction time down, learned how to use the equipment, and understood the ideal timing involved in stirring, he could produce coffee with a consistent taste each time. After receiving thorough instructions, Amane practiced until he got it right. This proved that even Amane, who had been given strict guidance, could pull it off with enough practice under his belt.

"Yeah. It's delicious," Daichi taught Amane the ropes while Souji and Rino handled the customers, given that only a few customers were present and the number of orders had settled down.

His coffee, brewed using a siphon, looked the same as the ones served in the café. There didn't appear to be any issues with it.

"However, from watching you brew, I think you should stir the beans a bit more, and you could've been a little quicker with the extraction."

"I am using a timer, though…"

"I reckon you're being a little too conservative with the timing since you're not used to the equipment yet, and are being extra careful. That

difference in timing is probably what gave it a slightly more bitter undertone."

"Sorry for that, I'll do my best to improve."

Daichi's advice was not harsh, but instead rather gentle and polite, despite the fact that Amane's lack of confidence in serving others was probably the biggest reason for the training process being so drawn out.

Since the flasks used with the siphon coffee maker were made of glass, there was always the risk of bumping into them, causing them to drop and shatter… Such worries plagued Amane terribly.

Daichi seemed to understand, for he showed Amane a cheerfully understanding smile.

"I was afraid to handle them at first, too. Felt like they'd shatter if I looked at them wrong," he said, reassuring him. "In all reality, you'll be in the clear so long as you don't drop or handle them really roughly. From what I see, you're one to always take the cautious approach when handling things like that, Fujimiya-kun."

"I hope so, but…"

"That donkey… I mean, Rino, ended up shattering one on her first day, so I'd say you're absolutely on the careful side, Fujimiya-kun."

Amane noticed that dreadful slip of the tongue, but he feigned ignorance.

"That said, everyone makes mistakes. You won't get yelled at if you break one, so don't fret about it," Daichi tried to further put his mind at ease. "Well, even the owner would scold you with a troubled look if you end up breaking a few of them, though."

"Sounds like you're talking from experience," Amane noted.

"That's because Rino did it," he clarified before adding, "The owner's face was frozen stiff back then." Daichi's odd sense of pleased nostalgia was reflected in his tone of voice in that moment, and Amane smiled weakly in the face of the uncomfortable story.

...Must've been total chaos.

Amane knew from his very first day on the job that those siphons didn't come cheap, so there weren't many of them. Having several of them break at once must have hindered the café's sales significantly.

The siphons at the café were manufactured by Fumika's favorite brand, and they were all carefully selected. Even the thought of having to replace a single broken siphon felt too costly to bear, much less multiple at the same time.

Let's be extra careful with this, Amane vowed to himself, taking a sip of the coffee he'd brewed with Daichi's supervision.

A distinct bitter tang spread across his tongue.

Going down otherwise smoothly, the coffee was easy to drink, and the bitterness didn't linger on his tongue for long. Instead, the overall taste was gentle, maintaining a rich flavor full of depth.

Amane wasn't a fan of overly strong coffee, but this one had a well-balanced mix of bitterness, acidity, and a faint sweetness from the beans themselves, making it very easy to drink. However, he did realize that there was room for improvement, as the bitterness and acidity were still stronger than what Daichi had brewed earlier as a demonstration.

"*Ooh!* How looovely! Now *that's* what I call enticing!"

With a lack of orders being placed out front, Rino took the opportunity to have a breather and entered the back. She held a tray with used dishes in her hand, likely from a customer who had just left.

"Fujimiya-chan, gimme a sip?" asked Rino, placing the dishes in the sink and approaching Amane. Just as he wondered what to do, Daichi grabbed Rino by the scruff of her neck and pulled her away from him.

It happened so quickly that Amane couldn't immediately understand what had just occurred.

"Hey, don't do that. Fujimiya has a girlfriend, you know. Don't cause misunderstandings," scolded Daichi.

"Oh, sorry! Now you mention it, I do remember something like that," Rino said, backing off obediently. "I have a lot of older brothers, so I'm used to this kind of thing."

Daichi must have put a stop to her shenanigans since Amane had briefly explained his situation to him as they were working.

Daichi couldn't hide his disbelief, but Rino just grinned. Amane had been wondering if he could ask the two about their seemingly close relationship, which had become increasingly obvious over the past week.

"You two seem to get along well," remarked Amane.

"Well, we *do* go way back—we've known each since we were kids. Been by each other's side for over twenty years now," Rino explained.

"Saying we're *stuck* with each other wouldn't be far off the mark," added Daichi.

"*Harsh much!?*" Rino playfully chopped Daichi in the side, and he pinched her in response, making her yelp. They quickly exchanged playful

blows, taking advantage of the fact that customers couldn't see them.

Their easygoing familiarity was clearly not developed overnight, and Amane found himself better understanding why they seemed so close. Still, he couldn't help but feel that they were perhaps a bit too close for childhood friends of the opposite sex. He tilted his head, unsure if this was the norm for male-female childhood friends. He could understand the closeness between Ayaka and Souji since they were dating, but Daichi and Rino more or less had a similar vibe.

Amane didn't think he was currently close enough to them to point this out, and it would be rude to pry out of mere curiosity. So, putting that thought of his on hold, he simply watched the pair's light banter without further questioning.

"Oh, just wondering, but what's your sweetheart like, Fujimiya-chan?" asked Rino innocently, finally freeing herself from Daichi's grip.

Amane looked up, pondering. "What's she like, you ask…? Well, she's a lovely and tender-hearted girl."

It was difficult to describe Mahiru when asked what kind of girl she was. Anyone from their school would know without being told, but Rino was a college student with no connection to Amane's school, so she wouldn't know without an explanation. Still, telling someone from outside their school about a girl dubbed the *Angel* would probably result in either laughter or discomfort, so he couldn't explain it that way either.

Feeling that his bias as her boyfriend would lead to unintentionally bragging about her if he told his coworker his image of Mahiru, Amane had opted for more generic expressions. However, Rino seemed quite dissatisfied with his explanation, her frown accompanied by a "Hmpf."

"*Hmm*. Well, a quick glance over you tells me that your girlfriend must be a really upstanding girl, but just saying she's lovely doesn't give me the real deal, Fujimiya-chan. Get me?" she said.

"I agree, but it's true that she's a hardworking and good-natured person. Do you really want to know that much about someone else's girlfriend?"

"Of course! Hearing about other people's love stories is no different from gorging on honey, and girls, no matter their age, just *love* talking about love. And we're more than happy to hear you brag about your girl! Consider it the icing on our very sweet cake."

"*Girls*, huh…," interjected Daichi.

"Daichi. Got a problem?"

“Oh, not in the slightest.”

“A-Alright, alright…,” Amane tried to calm the tense atmosphere between the two while sipping his cooling coffee, and Rino, perhaps due to Daichi’s comment, approached him with a slightly intense look on her face.

“Moving along… You’re the no-nonsense type, right? So I’m itchin’ to know about this girlfriend you’re smitten with, Fujimiya-chan.”

“I get that you’re curious, but still…”

“Hey, aren’t you gonna bring her here?”

“About that, I’ve asked her not to come. At least until I get familiar with the job, anyway. Sorry to disappoint.”

“*Awww…*”

Rino let out the cutest pout she could muster, but Amane had no intention of yielding. To begin with, he didn’t understand why she was so eager to bring his girlfriend to his workplace or have her visit. Being told this by both Itsuki *and* his coworkers was beyond his expectations.

“Well, let’s just say that I’ll get to see your sweetheart someday. Is she a cutie by any chance?” she asked.

“Objectively, or from my perspective?”

“Both?”

“Objectively, I think she’s incredibly cute,” Amane began. “But for me, she’s the cutest girl in the world.”

Amane decided to answer this question honestly and as plainly as possible without it sounding like he was boasting. Mahiru’s beauty was such that, regardless of personal preferences, anyone would consider her beautiful. He couldn’t give up on that point.

As her boyfriend, he wanted to also say that Mahiru’s cuteness lay more in her behavior and the affectionate side of her that only he saw, rather than her outside appearance.

She’s always so adorable without even trying to be…

Her pouting when jealous of other girls even though she knew he had no ill intentions, her tugging at the hem of his clothes when she was lonely, and her headbutting him to hide her embarrassment when her shyness reached its peak—Amane found all of these small gestures incredibly endearing. If she were intentionally acting this way, she would be considered cunningly cute, but Mahiru was genuinely like this, which sometimes made it hard for Amane’s heart to keep up. In fact, it would be easier for him to deal with it if she were doing it on purpose, but since she was acting this way naturally and

genuinely, he was always struck to the core.

Though he could go on and on about her cuteness if he wanted to, he decided to keep it to himself and be concise in his words, lest he be met with either disdain or disbelief from his two seniors. However, Rino covered her mouth with a grin, saying, “My, oh my! Bragging now, are we?” trying to tease him.

“You were the one who said you were more than happy to listen…,” Amane retorted.

“*C’monn*, you’re working part-time for her sake, right? She must be a really nice girl, one you’d wanna do *everything* for, right?”

“It’s not really for her sake; I’m doing it because I want to. It’s a decision I made on my own.”

Amane felt it necessary to clarify this point.

He started working part-time because he wanted to, not because he was trying to do something for Mahiru. He didn’t intend to burden her with any responsibility.

Even if he knew that what he was doing would contribute to Mahiru’s happiness, he didn’t want to make her partly responsible by saying it was for ‘her sake.’ He was doing this for himself, and if it benefited Mahiru, that would be great, but he couldn’t compromise on that point.

“I can’t say it’s for her sake. I’m doing this because I want to, and as a result, I’m making her feel lonely. That makes me a selfish person, you know,” Amane cleared up.

He knew that Mahiru both accepted and respected his decision despite it resulting in them spending time apart, but he also knew he was making her lonely and increasing her burden. That’s why he was always grateful and intended to work hard to achieve his goal as soon as possible.

So, Amane had firmly and bluntly declared that he didn’t want to think of Mahiru as a reason or excuse for his struggles, to which Rino and Daichi blinked in admiration.

“You’re such a serious fellow…,” she noted.

“A far cry from you, Rino, that’s for sure,” Daichi returned.

“What’re you complaining about now?”

“You jump ship too often. How many months did you stick around with your last boyfriend?”

“Ugh, just drop it, Daichi. Who I date is none of your business. I’m not stealing anyone’s boyfriend nor am I dating you, so don’t go nitpicking at

everything I do just 'cause we're childhood friends."

"……Yeah, whatever you say. Please accept my *deepest* apologies."

Daichi frowned slightly after being so strongly rebuffed, looking somewhat hurt as his gaze wandered. Rino, oblivious to his antics, returned to the front with a slightly sour expression.

After watching her go with a somewhat pleading gaze, Daichi dropped the act and shifted back to his usual gentle expression, when he noticed Amane's gaze, acting as if nothing had happened.

"…Uh, Miyamoto-san…," Amane called out hesitantly.

"Hmm?"

"I'm, uh, sorry for that."

Amane lowered his eyes, feeling that the situation was his fault, having said something that he shouldn't have, but Daichi waved his hand with a carefree laugh.

"Oh… Don't sweat it, Fujimiya. You're not to blame here. She's always acted like that, and I think it's a little too late for me to say anything about it now."

"N-No, that's not what I meant—"

"Fujimiya."

"Yes?"

"People's hearts often don't sway the way you'd like them to. I know that all too well."

"…Right."

"It's nothing you need to be concerned about. It's fine, don't let it bother you."

Amane couldn't tell if he said that to dispel his worries or if Daichi had already resigned himself to the situation, giving up on her acting as she did. But one thing was for sure: Daichi, for a brief moment, had a pained expression in his eyes as he spoke that just may have been genuine.

He told Amane in his usual casual, emotionless tone, "I'm off to check on the customers, so I'm counting on you to clean up," and left the kitchen. Amane was unsure of whether Daichi had picked up on his thoughts on the matter or not.

Souji returned, as if swapping places with Daichi, coming back with a tray piled full of dishes. He smiled bitterly once he saw Amane's expression.

"…There's no point in talking to Miyamoto-san about it," Souji claimed. "He's made up his mind about it, and he is going to follow his own path as

well, Fujimiya."

Souji attempted to laugh it off as he shook his head slightly. He must have been stationed by the counter, because he seemed to have some idea of the situation. Putting away the used dishes, Souji had spoken in a way that showed his own concern for their circumstances, and appeared to have guessed their conversation.

"It doesn't feel right to pry too much into people's personal affairs, but am I imagining things correctly?" asked Amane.

"I'm not you, so I can't see inside your head, but probably."

"…This is tricky. I haven't met anyone like this before, so I don't know what to make of it."

If this guess was true, Amane could easily tell that Daichi must've had a hard time. He liked someone who was constantly involved with other men, and she just kept changing partners. She never looked his way, and it must have been especially painful to be close to her as a childhood friend. Amane thought it would be rude to assume Daichi's feelings, but just imagining it made his heart ache.

"Let me make this clear, though: Oohashi-san's not a bad person or anything. She just falls in love easily, but also falls out of it just as easily," Souji clarified.

"Many times?"

"I've been working here since we were first-years, and Oohashi-san was here even before that. As far as I know, she's had five or six boyfriends so far. While she hasn't had multiple relationships at once, her partners do keep changing."

"Wow… she must be really popular," Amane commented.

"She looks like a gentle beauty, but some see her as an easy target. On the inside, though, she can be quite frank and harsh."

She had a slender, tall, and model-like figure, but her facial features were rather sweet and kind, making her seem like a prim and proper woman until she spoke. When she did, she came off as rather high-spirited and was fast to make dirty jokes without hesitation, creating a large contrast between her appearance and personality.

She's a bright and bubbly person, but you'd never guess her personality based on her looks alone… Amane couldn't help but wonder if that was a factor in her being quick to change partners.

"…So, Miyamoto-san has been watching her cycle through boyfriends all

this time?" Amane asked. "While not giving a single word of complaint?"

"Sure has."

"Consider me amazed…"

"Well, it's not something we have any say in. Things might actually work out at this rate, don't you think? In the end, Miyamoto-san is the only one who can understand and take care of Oohashi-san. I bet things will settle down eventually. Oohashi-san might even come crying to him one day, when she figures it out."

Souji, who seemed to have no intention of breaking their positions as workplace seniors and juniors, gave a very casual evaluation. Perhaps due to having witnessed their interactions many times before, Amane reevaluated the situation, choosing to go with the thought that it wasn't his place to interfere since he wasn't that close to Daichi.

It would be better to keep an eye out for them, but otherwise wait and see, rather than worrying and meddling unnecessarily. While giving someone a well-needed push can be important at times, it could also cause their relationship to collapse. Amane didn't have a deep enough friendship with Daichi to take on that responsibility.

"Well, Miyamoto-san and Oohashi-san should be fine. Uh, what was the phrase for this again…? *A broken pot with a patched lid*, was it?" [8]

"Kayano, that's a pretty rude way of putting it…"

"Oi, who're you calling a patched lid?"

"*Gah*, Miyamoto-san."

Daichi, overhearing something he probably shouldn't have, looked at Souji with a seemingly carefree yet intense smile. In fact, he straight-up glared at him.

"Kayano, you go wash the siphon. And the filter, too," Daichi demanded.

"…On it."

"Fujimiya, you also going?"

"Y-Yeah."

Wouldn't do good to go against him here… Amane complied quickly with a strained smile.

Rino's cheerful voice then rang out clearly as she returned from the front to check up on them, "Ah, Daichi's bullying the new guy! Gonna snitch on you to Itomaki-chan!"

"I'm not bullying him!" Daichi exclaimed. "You don't understand, so don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong!"

“Rich coming from you, you bully! You’re the worst!”

Although it wasn’t actually bullying but rather a consequence of their actions, Rino, who didn’t know the circumstances, playfully poked at Daichi as if teasing him. As a result, Daichi’s face naturally stiffened.

“Gotta say, Miyamoto-san gets all stubborn precisely because Oohashi-san acts like that…”

“…You got that right.”

Conversing in such a way that they wouldn’t be overheard, Amane and Souji sighed in unison at the muffled sound of quarreling behind them—all while they cleaned the dishes and utensils they’d been ordered to do.

Chapter 9

The Angel's Secret 'Business'

Lately, Amane had grown used to returning home from work after the sun had set, and often lightly jogged back along the streets at nighttime as part of his daily exercise.

Given the likelihood of being stopped for being out so late in a school uniform, he naturally made it a point to change into his tracksuit after his shift, and he securely wore a reflective sash around himself, too. The getup wouldn't earn him any awards at a fashion show, but it was a necessary measure to ensure safety. It couldn't be helped, really.

After returning via train to the station closest to his apartment, he would briskly head toward his complex while keeping his eyes peeled for oncoming cars and pedestrians. By the time he arrived, there were only about three more hours left in the day.

Usually, this time would have been scheduled for him to spend quality time together with Mahiru. As a former member of the go-home club, Amane's now packed schedule brought a strange feeling along with it, but it wasn't necessarily a *bad* feeling.

Up until now, he had been too lax. Before meeting Mahiru, Amane had been lazing around at home indulging in activities befitting of the go-home club, and after getting closer to her, he'd spent a lot of time studying and relaxing together with her, and his schedule was never too packed.

While setting and abiding by a strict schedule did feel a little restricting, he found it to be fulfilling as well.

"I'm home," he called out, mentally and physically drained.

Although he had somewhat gotten used to his new lifestyle, he still experienced a faint lethargic feeling as he opened the door to his home. The lights were turned on, but there was no sign of anyone being there.

He'd initially thought that Mahiru would be waiting for him with dinner prepared, but when he took off his shoes and looked toward the living room,

she was nowhere to be found.

Peeking over into the kitchen, Amane picked up on a rather pleasant smell wafting from it, and also noticed that a pot had been left on the stove, still covered with a lid. Whatever food was inside it seemed to have already been prepared, indicating that Mahiru had prepared dinner and then left his apartment. While he believed it was a good thing for her to value her personal time, he couldn't help but find it unusual.

Amane had sent her a message before he left work that he was on his way home, but just as he considered sending another one, he heard the sound of the front door unlocking. The sound was a little frantic, as if she'd been in a hurry.

"Oh, A-Amane-kun, you're home early today…"

"Someone else is on cleanup today, apparently. Plus I ran a little faster on the way back," he explained, listing the reasons he'd arrived earlier than usual. "…Sorry, though. Looks like you were busy with something, Mahiru. Perhaps I should've relaxed my pace."

"No, not at all! I wanted to see your face as soon as possible, Amane-kun!" Panicked, Mahiru shook her head from side to side ever so slightly. Her hair fluttered about as she did so, and Amane replied, "Glad to hear you say that," with a faint smile as he watched her.

What Mahiru had said was utterly cute, and Amane couldn't help but break out into a smile, but she didn't seem to be too bothered by it. Instead, she looked down somewhat uncomfortably and muttered something under her breath.

"Mahiru?"

"Oh, I was just lost in thought, please don't mind me," she responded. "I shall prepare our dinner now that you're back, Amane-kun. I'll heat it up while you take a bath—the tub already has plenty of hot water for you."

"Thanks as always." Amane was a little puzzled at how awkwardly she was acting compared to usual, but just as he was about to slip past her, "*...Hm?*" he noticed a sweet scent coming from her.

Mahiru had always smelled rather sweet, but the quality of the sweet aroma permeating the air was somewhat different from that. It wasn't from her shampoo, nor was it her natural scent, but rather a kind of sugary smell that clung to her from her surroundings.

To put a finger on it, it smelled just like baked sweets.

"Wh–What's the matter?" she asked.

"…Well, uh… I was just thinking that you smell a little different today. Like sweets, or something baked."

"Eh? …That's because I, erm… had some snacks… at home."

"Oh? You eat less than I do, Mahiru; wouldn't you lose your appetite if you ate something before dinner?" he asked, a little bewildered.

Usually, Mahiru refrained from eating between meals so that she could maintain her figure, so this was rather odd for her.

Besides, although Mahiru wasn't exactly a *light* eater, she did tend to eat less. It'd prove challenging for her to have snacks while still eating her usual portion of dinner.

"I–I will be able to clean my plate, so it should be okay. Anyway, please go take a bath now, Amane-kun. You must be hungry after work, right?"

"I'm running on empty right now, to be honest."

"If that's the case, I say you take a refreshing bath before treating yourself to a delicious meal," Mahiru suggested. "How does that sound?" She pushed Amane by the back as if trying to cover something up, and while he did think something was off, he went to his room to grab a change of clothes, swept along by her suggestion.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

It appeared that Mahiru was keeping a secret from Amane.

Every time Amane came back from his part-time job, this suspicion of his grew stronger. Not even a suspicion, really—it was more of a certainty at this point. She looked to be keeping something under wraps, for whatever reason.

That only applied when Amane was out of the house, and not even a shred of that secrecy was shown on days Amane wasn't working. As such, there must've been something she didn't want him to see.

...I wonder what she's hiding…

Fundamentally, Mahiru was a terrible liar—she was awful at keeping things to herself as her attitude was often a dead giveaway. This time, however, she was trying her best to evade his suspicions and deceive him, pretending as if nothing was going on.

Whatever it was, she really didn't want Amane to find out about it.

That being said, even if Amane asked Mahiru directly, she would undoubtedly dodge the question, and it wasn't like he wanted to force an

answer out of her purely out of curiosity. Mahiru had her own thoughts and, for all he knew, it could be an issue that was hard to bring up between a boy and a girl.

Considering all of that, persistently trying to find out could be considered rude, so Amane, although somewhat suspicious, opted against asking her directly.

Also, both Chitose and Ayaka had insisted they didn't know a thing when he asked. However, judging from their reactions, they seemed to be aware of the content of the secret. Thus, they too were accomplices involved with this *secret*.

Amane couldn't hide his uneasy feeling over being left out, but he refrained from saying anything, out of consideration that there might be matters that could only be shared with people of the same sex.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

"…You know, Mahiru seems to be hiding something from me."

Amane couldn't help but share his anxiety with his co-worker, Souji, while they were commuting to their part-time job. He could tell that Mahiru was planning on keeping up her secret today as well because it was clear from the way she continued to act. This made his heart ache with unease.

Souji and Amane happened to be on the same shift and were heading to work together, and Amane had brought the topic up the moment they sat down on the train, which had taken Souji by surprise. But seeing Amane's expression, Souji figured that it wouldn't be a lighthearted topic, so he straightened up and put a serious face on as he sat next to him.

"Did you two have an argument, or something along those lines?" Souji asked.

"No, not even briefly. It's just that Mahiru seems to be hiding something... And by the looks of things, it's not like I did anything wrong, either."

For good measure, Amane asked her whether he'd done anything wrong without realizing it, but Mahiru only tilted her head in confusion at his question, so that didn't appear to be the case. Because of that, the mystery only deepened. Riddles upon riddles were piling up, causing Amane mental strain.

“Hmm. If a girlfriend’s trying to keep something under wraps, it’s typically them cheating, but I can’t imagine Shiina-san ever doing that. I don’t know her that well, but given her character and your close relationship, we can write that possibility off.”

“That’s what I think, too,” Amane promptly responded, “There’s no way Mahiru would do something so underhanded. She despises even the idea of cheating and infidelity more than anyone else I’ve ever known.”

What Souji had suggested was something Mahiru would obviously never do.

With her complicated upbringing and childhood environment, Mahiru detested disloyalty. She saw her mother having an affair with another man, even openly spending time with him in public. Putting aside the fact that the woman had been subjected to a loveless marriage from the very start, Mahiru had still vowed to *never* walk down the same path as her mother, and hated the very idea of it.

There was no way Mahiru would betray him in such a way, and it was equally unlikely that Chitose or Ayaka would’ve cooperated with her if that was actually the case. They were both sensible and devoted girls, and likely found infidelity distasteful in much the same way.

However, Amane couldn’t think of anything else one would keep hidden like that.

Mahiru wasn’t good at keeping secrets, and usually, she didn’t even try to. She tended to feel a strong sense of guilt whenever she plotted something behind closed doors, and was quick to confess to what she’d done when probed just a little. But this time, it seemed like she wanted to keep whatever it was completely hidden and had gone to great efforts not to say anything. What’s more, she was the type of person who disliked lying and deceiving others in general, which made Amane all the more suspicious.

“Because of that, if Mahiru’s trying to keep something a secret, it probably isn’t anything worth being suspicious about. Whatever it is that she’s trying to hide, I don’t think it’ll be something terrible. Either it’s something she’s embarrassed to talk about, or it’s something related to me. If she broke something, she’d come clean right away and apologize, so it mustn’t be anything harmful.”

Amane had known Mahiru for about a year now, and they had been dating for about five months, give or take. He had a good grasp of her personality and habits after spending so much time together with her.

Given that Mahiru had her own thoughts on the matter, and the fact that she was desperately trying to hide it, Amane could tell that it ought to be something rather significant. However, that didn't mean it was malicious.

"So, what are you gonna do about it?"

"Not planning on doing anything, really."

"*Huh?*" replied Souji instinctively, surprised by Amane's casual assertion.

Amane let out a quiet sigh, blending it in with the low rumble of the train as it made its way down the track.

"It's something that Mahiru wants to keep hidden, so it wouldn't be a good idea for me to pry. I have a secret or two I don't want to share with her as well, so if she doesn't want me to touch the subject, I won't. Simple as that."

Amane was hiding the reason he was working from Mahiru, so he had no right to interfere in her business, either. Sure, they may hide a few things from each other, but even if they did, it wouldn't be a problem as long as they could maintain a healthy relationship otherwise.

"And you're fine with that, huh," remarked Souji.

"I trust that Mahiru would never hurt me intentionally, after all. Rather than meddling in everything, it's better to be considerate of the things you want to keep hidden from one another. It's precisely *because* I trust her that I ought to respect her privacy, and I'd even say that's the secret to a harmonious relationship."

That was something Amane had learned from watching his parents, and nothing was more convincing after seeing their strong, affectionate relationship. As their son, Amane thought that they always had a good relationship and understood each other well, all while not necessarily being involved in everything the other did.

Contrary to what people who knew his parents may think, they didn't always stick together. While this surprised others, they very much valued their alone time and often pursued their own hobbies in separate places. Even when they were together in the same place, they were often doing different things, yet the atmosphere was warm and soft, comfortable enough for their son, Amane, to appreciate it.

Having observed how his parents act, Amane learned to respect both his own time and that of his partner.

"Just curious, but, what if it *was* something she felt guilty about?"

"If so, then it means that I wasn't someone worth consulting, and if

Mahiru actually did leave me, it'd be because I was unattractive, unattentive, and pathetic. In short, the fault would lie in me."

Mahiru was, undoubtedly, a very loving, devoted, and sincere girl. If such a girl were to leave Amane without talking anything through, then the problem would likely be entirely on Amane's end.

Knowing Mahiru, she would express her feelings sincerely before putting an end to the relationship. And since that wasn't happening, it meant that she was hiding a personal secret that didn't conflict with common sense or her morals. So, not wanting to make her uncomfortable, Amane didn't feel inclined to probe any further.

Even considering all of that, however, it was only natural that he'd grow curious about it.

"Well, this *is* Mahiru we're talking about, so I'm sure it'll turn out just fine, but it's tough not to get curious," Amane admitted. "Knowing that she's hiding something makes it harder for me to relax, to be perfectly honest with you."

"…Fujimiya," Souji responded after a brief moment of thought. "You're pretty… level-headed once you've made up your mind about something, aren't you?"

"You think so?"

Amane was only content with waiting due to the deep trust that he had for Mahiru. Being impatient wouldn't get him anywhere. It would be better for him to sit back and wait calmly until Mahiru wanted to reveal it herself, whenever that would be.

Since he was sure that nothing terrible would come of it, Amane decided against questioning her. After all, this is Mahiru they were talking about.

...I just hope she'll forgive me for feeling a little antsy about it, as pathetic as that might sound…

"Back when I'd pass by you in the corridor, you were always looking down at the floor, not having much in the way of confidence…" Souji began, noting the stark contrast between Amane now and several months ago. "But now, you're the proud boyfriend of such a splendid *Angel*."

"That's exactly how it was, after all—I didn't have much confidence in myself back then. It's all thanks to Mahiru's support and my friends who gave me a kick in the butt and slap on the back that I'm now able to stand tall and proud like this. That's how it feels, anyway."

Sure, Amane had been kicked and slapped by his friends before in the

physical sense, but in the metaphorical sense, it was surely thanks to them that he was now standing confidently next to Mahiru, and that she was able to support him like she was.

Because she supported him both emotionally and with practical matters such as meals and lifestyle habits, Amane didn't find his hard work to be burdensome—in fact, he found it enjoyable and satisfying.

"Truly, I can't thank her enough," Amane concluded, and Souji nodded along thoughtfully.

"…So Shiina-san's like, the secret to your success, huh… Or actually, it's more like the more you cherish her, Fujimiya, the more she lets you shine." [9]

"Whether I'm 'shining' or not aside, I just can't afford to be timid when standing next to her," Amane laid out his thoughts. "I gotta be proud of myself, and I want to be a man worthy of respect… Plus, Mahiru's the reason why I started to think this way in the first place. She's the one truly supporting and encouraging me."

"…If you ask me, I think your values must be part of what makes people want to support you, though?"

"I'm flattered you think that, but I still think it's thanks to Mahiru that I was able to become something I could be confident in. Because of that, I want to put in the effort to be worthy of her… No, that's not the entirety of it. I want to put in the effort *because* it's Mahiru."

After that, Amane murmured, "That said, isn't Mahiru just *so* amazing?" to which Souji somewhat joked, "You know, I do wonder why I'm here just to listen to you brag about her," which left Amane feeling both apologetic and somewhat embarrassed until they finally arrived at the station.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

Amane worked around three to four times each week, changing depending on the shifts he was assigned, but the number never strayed from that range.

Despite the weekend being the best time to earn money, he always left one of the days free, preferring to spend the extra time either with Mahiru or for himself. As a student, he couldn't very well neglect his studies, and the owner, Fumika, was very understanding. She was also very supportive, especially regarding his true goal for getting a job.

Today was a day off, and ever since this morning, Amane had spent his time relaxing. And by *relaxing*, that also included his workout, a light jog that he had done in the morning, and the easy assignments that he'd completed relatively quickly, so it was better to say that he finally got the chance to completely relax.

Not only am I living much healthier than before, but I'm so much more organized, too, Amane thought to himself, letting out a bitter smile.

He had diligently finished everything he needed to do in the morning, but there was one thing still clouding his mind.

Exactly. Mahiru's secret.

Looks like she's been acting all sneaky again today, too…

Mahiru, who had come over to Amane's house shortly after lunchtime, was acting slightly awkward yet again. Although she had somewhat calmed down now, past around two o'clock, she seemed to be on edge whenever Amane shot a glance at her, making it clear as day that she was hiding something.

He didn't point out his realization, however, so without any scrutiny coming her way, Mahiru gradually regained her composure as time went by. She now looked calm and composed as she sat next to Amane on the sofa, but her mind seemed to be elsewhere. Preoccupied by her thoughts, one could say.

With it being his precious day off and all, Amane at least wanted to enjoy some time together with Mahiru, but… he didn't find it appropriate to impose on her while she was so deep in thought. At the very least, he wanted to hug her in order to replenish the Mahiruium that he now often lacked due to his part-time job.

"Mahiru."

"Yes?"

"…May I hug you?" While relieved by her response, Amane asked hesitantly. Mahiru's caramel-colored eyes blinked at his question and then she nodded, smiling gently.

Softly, she spread her arms out wide, so Amane accepted her kindness and gently wrapped his arms around her.

Today, Mahiru smelled like chocolate.

…Gotta say, not a day passes now when Mahiru doesn't smell sweet.

Despite how much Mahiru loved sweets, she didn't eat them often—this was because she was so meticulous about maintaining her figure that she was

hardly one to ever cave in and treat herself, much less do it often.

And yet, she often gave off a sugary scent as of late.

As the one by her side, Amane wasn't as big a fan of sweets as she was, but the sweet fragrance was an exception. He rather enjoyed it, actually, so he wasn't opposed to the gentle aroma of sweets that wafted over each time he touched or was near her.

...What a nice smell.

Politely and gently, Amane began to embrace her delicate body, but the moment he lightly touched her waist to pull her closer—

"*No!*"

—Mahiru's body jolted.

Perhaps that was too sudden for her...?

Amane's mind began to cool rapidly after hearing her seemingly instinctive refusal.

Just because she was always by Amane's side and often snuggled with him didn't mean he had the right to touch her hips at his own convenience. Sure, she was his girlfriend, but he couldn't just touch her however he pleased. There were bound to be times when she wasn't in the mood for it, or simply didn't want to be touched in such a way.

Amane let go of her body with an awkward look, and Mahiru, appearing not to understand what was going on, looked up at him with a puzzled expression.

"…My bad," Amane apologized. "I got carried away."

"Huh? I–I wasn't against it! That's not it at all! I didn't mean to give you the wrong idea, Amane-kun! It's not that I dislike being held by you, you know!?" Panicked, Mahiru hurriedly corrected his misunderstanding while making some exaggerated gestures, appearing to have picked up on the fact that Amane felt rejected.

"But, you didn't like it…"

"R-Rather than not liking it… erm, I'm just a little self-conscious. …About my belly, that is."

"Your *belly*?"

"…I–I may have gained weight, so holding my waist is a little…," she said, putting a hand to her belly. Given that Mahiru had unparalleled self-control and always seemed to maintain an ideal figure, Amane could only tilt his head. And from looking at her, from touching her, Mahiru possibly gaining weight was something that hadn't even crossed his mind at

all.

Even just then, she was just as slender as she always had been, to the point that it made Amane a little anxious, in fact. He figured that she'd be better off putting a little weight on for her health's sake, considering how skinny she was.

"Where? You look as slim as ever to me," Amane noted. "And besides, you don't even eat enough to gain weight, do you?"

Amane knew that at home, Mahiru tended to do some light stretching and exercises, and that she also went for a jog whenever she had the time. Plus, she would play fitness-related games on his console once in a while.

Although she was also a member of the go-home club, Mahiru never missed a chance to exercise, instead prioritizing her beauty. Amane found it hard to believe that she, the very epitome of self-discipline, could ever gain weight.

Yes, he found it hard to believe, but for whatever reason, Mahiru *still* refused to meet Amane's gaze.

"…So, did you?"

"I–I haven't. For one, I haven't been slacking on exercising at all, and have actually been doing it more frequently. I have also been maintaining a balanced diet with three meals per day. …I have been, but… erm, outside of those meals, I…"

"You ate between meals?"

"I wouldn't exactly say that…," she trailed off before coming to a realization. "…Actually, yes. I have been eating between meals—that's why."

"That's pretty rare for you."

Amane was surprised that Mahiru, who took great care in maintaining her figure, had eaten enough to make herself worried. While together, Amane hadn't noticed her eating any more than she usually did, so that meant she must've been eating in her apartment. Perhaps she'd stumbled upon something truly delicious.

"Well, there's a reason why autumn's the *season of good appetite*, or so they say. Not to mention the food's just plain delicious, too. Autumn's when all the tasty ingredients start popping up again, unlike summer, so it can't be helped if you eat a little more than usual."

"…Me being indecisive and particular doesn't help much either…," Mahiru blurted out.

"Huh?"

“Please don’t mind it,” she said, brushing her own comment aside. “…Anyway, if you touch my belly right now, I’m afraid the fat might…”

“I don’t think you’ve got any excess fat or anything, though, Mahiru… You’ve got such a slim body with no flab to speak of. Plus, even if you did gain a little weight, it’d still be within a perfectly acceptable range.” To Amane, expectations from society about how thin women should be were simply excessive. “With how slender and toned you are, it wouldn’t hurt to gain a little more weight, y’know?” From his point of view, Mahiru would be thin enough even by those harsh standards of the public.

It wouldn’t be a problem if Mahiru gained some weight. Amane wasn’t attracted to her because she was slender, because she was cute, or because she was beautiful—he liked Mahiru herself. Her physique had nothing to do with it, and as long as she had a healthy body, Amane wasn’t concerned about any numbers on a scale.

Therefore, looking thoughtfully into Mahiru’s eyes, he said, “Honestly, you don’t need to worry about it.” Shortly after that, she peeped up at him, groaning, “Uuuu,” ever so softly.

While it may have been a dire problem for Mahiru herself, Amane believed that a slight bump to her body fat was nothing to fret over. If anything, Mahiru occupying more space in the world would be something worth being delighted about.

To add to that, there was no noticeable difference in her weight when touching her, so being denied the opportunity to touch was the *real* life-or-death matter.

“…I just want to be healed for a bit…,” he confessed. “Can’t I?”

“I–It’s not that you *can’t*, but…” While Mahiru tried to stand her ground, she relented. “I guess you can…”

Chuckling at Mahiru’s sudden change of heart, Amane pulled her closer. To be precise, he lifted her up as though embracing her body. As he held the now frozen-stiff Mahiru in his arms, Amane sat back down on the sofa, positioning her right between his legs—he was now hugging her just like one would a stuffed animal.

When it came to hugging on the sofa, this was the most comfortable position. Still, whether it was due to embarrassment or something else, Mahiru seemed to look slightly uncomfortable. However, since she settled down meekly, entrusting herself to Amane, she probably wasn’t against this turn of events.

He wrapped his arms firmly around the front of her body, and rubbed her belly, which she was so preeminently conscious about. She felt so slim and delicate that Amane couldn't help but wonder how she had managed to convince herself that she'd gained weight.

"…Like I thought, you really haven't gained anything at all."

"I am putting the effort in, after all. But even so, it still worried me a little."

"Even though you're this thin… Well, it's not like I'm gonna tell you what you can and can't think, if you're that concerned about it, but just don't push yourself too hard." he suggested, "I'll love you however you are, Mahiru."

"…Yes."

So long as it was within a healthy range, Amane would support Mahiru if she desired to lose weight, but it wasn't like he explicitly wished her to do so. While he adamantly denied the misconception that she'd gained weight, by no means would he ever deny her feelings or the effort that she exerted to lose said weight.

Whatever it is that she does, I just hope she doesn't push herself too hard…

Gently yet firmly, Amane then hugged her tightly, relishing her usual softness.

How does she manage to be so slender yet so soft?

Amane marveled at the intriguing mystery of a girl's body before burying his face in her shoulder. Then, that sugary aroma, which had mixed in with the smell of fabric softener and Mahiru's natural milk-like scent, slid into his nostrils.

So today's smell is some sort of chocolate, huh?

Picking up on that, Amane slid his lips right onto the base of her neck and pressed them against it lightly. While he hadn't at all thought about doing anything in particular, touching Mahiru's skin gave Amane a rush of happiness, and he even found her white, porcelain-like skin to be very appetizing. This was best described as an innate instinct of his as a man—and there was nothing that he could do about it.

Bringing his lips closer, Amane planted a tender kiss across her silky skin and nuzzled his cheek against hers, making Mahiru leak out a ticklish voice.

"…Amane-kun, you get all spoiled and affectionate when you get tired like this, don't you?" she remarked.

“I could say the same about you, Mahiru… But yeah, I guess I do end up longing for human affection.”

That exact line applied to Mahiru in very much the same way. When the both of them were tired, they would often cling to each other tightly to comfort one another. They would savor the warmth and the familiar scent of each other’s bodies, which gave them a sense of happiness and comfort.

Although Mahiru was typically the one fawning over him, Amane had recently been finding himself getting more and more fatigued, and in turn, had started to become more comfortable with showing her his vulnerable side. And as it so happened, Mahiru loved it when Amane depended on her openly like this, which only encouraged him to be pampered by her more often.

“You can do as you please, but please try not to leave any marks. They can be seen,” Mahiru continued. “…Chitose-san spotted the mark from when I last slept over, you know? And then she teased me.”

“That’s my bad…, I should’ve made it a little harder to find, in hindsight,” so Amane said, aware that at the time, he’d been caught up in the heat of the moment. His rational mind was only running on half-cylinders, which left his reason partly broken. Needless to say, while he hadn’t crossed that one line he shouldn’t have crossed, he had instead allowed his desire to dye her white skin a shade of red to take over.

Regrettably, he had ended up leaving a mark by doing so, which was a lesson he was reflecting on.

A wave of embarrassment washed over him as he remembered the events of that night, and this caused Amane to hold her even tighter than before. In response, Mahiru slapped his thighs a few times forcefully from within his embrace.

“That’s not even the main issue here, though!? Is that not proof that you’re getting a little too used to this, Amane-kun!?”

“I–I wouldn’t say I’m *used to it* or anything, but… it’s just that, uh, marking you as mine is… something that makes me feel happy, you see. As a man.”

There was no way he’d get used to it just from seeing her bare skin once.

Embarrassment crept onto his face at the mere memory of it, and even now, his desire to do it again seemed to be poised and ready to strike him at any moment. He was simply restraining it by main force of will.

However, one couldn’t just avoid having such desires. If he was given the

same opportunity yet again, Amane's lips would undoubtedly trace their path over Mahiru's fair skin in much the same way. Holding a far-from-content Mahiru in his arms, he muttered, "No way I'd get used to it. We're talking about my girlfriend's bare skin here," and entwined his hand with the one she'd been hitting his thigh with. In an instant, Mahiru quietened down.

If her bright red ears were any indication, she was nothing short of embarrassed.

"……Next time, please, leave it somewhere it cannot be seen," she then requested.

"I see that you're assuming we'll have a *next time*," Amane teased in response.

"Th–That's because, well… I enjoy everything that you do to me, Amane-kun, and it… feels good when you touch me… I really like it," she confessed hesitantly with a sigh, her voice hushed and her body fidgeting. Her words made Amane adore her even more, and he entwined his fingers tighter with the hand he was holding.

Amane understood that Mahiru would likely accept anything that he'd do, and her little confession of enjoying his touch flared up his desires once again. He managed to quell them, however, as he settled for expressing his affection for her with a kiss on the neck. As sensitive as ever, Mahiru trembled from within his arms, but she let Amane do as he pleased.

"…At *any* rate, you mustn't leave any marks," she reminded. "If you do, then it would be for your bir—"

"My what now?"

"…Nothing at all. Please do not worry about it."

"You *really* got me dying to know, though."

"It's nothing, really!"

Amane tilted his head at Mahiru, who had stopped herself mid-sentence before promptly raising her voice to try and cover it up. She leaned against him with all her might shortly after, which Amane gladly accepted with a smile, thinking about how adorable she was.

Chapter 10

And so, 'X' Day Arrived for the Angel

Although Amane had now started to work part-time, that didn't mean he spent all of his days off with Mahiru. She had her own life, and there were times when she wanted to be alone or spend time with someone else. Additionally, she'd been plotting something behind Amane's back as of late, and because of this, he often spent the time relaxing at home until dinner or hanging out with Itsuki and the others on any weekdays he didn't have work.

"Say, *Mister Newlywed*. You sure it's fine and dandy for you to be hangin' out with us? Your wife won't start sulking on you?"

At Itsuki's invitation, both Amane and Yuuta were brought along to taste-test a new product launched by a coffee chain they frequented. They ordered takeout, and headed over to a nearby park by the station to enjoy it, but just as they did so, Itsuki asked that question out of the blue.

Prior to this, Itsuki had half-jokingly suggested, "Whaddaya think of heading to Amane's café instead?" but Amane shut him down firmly.

"Who're you calling a newlywed?" Amane retorted. "Anyway, this is my free time, so it's not like me hanging out with my friends is a problem or anything. It'd be a different story if I was with girls, but you're just my guy friends, so it's purely just for fun. We're only messing around."

"Gosh! So now you're saying you just *mess around* with me…!?"

"*You're* the one who said that when you invited me, what are you even… And if you're taking *that* meaning of 'mess around,' then we've never had a relationship like that to begin with, so you were finished before you even began." Amane looked at Itsuki with a deadpan stare.

Itsuki wriggled his body back and forth dramatically, deliberately acting as though Amane was his partner and had cheated on him. Soon enough, he reverted to his usual self and dropped the act, now nodding knowingly.

"But of course," he said. "Ain't no way I can split a hot and heavy couple like you two apart."

“You’ve got Chitose, man. And I don’t need you.”

“Now that’s just cruel.”

“Well, you’d just get in the way if you were with them, Itsuki.”

“That’s pretty harsh of you too, Yuuta, don’tcha think?”

Nonchalantly throwing shade, Yuuta was drinking his newly-released limited-time Frozen Shake, all the while ignoring Itsuki’s comment with an innocent expression.

A week had passed since the start of November, and the weather had already begun to hint at the onset of winter. *...I’m surprised he chose to drink that in this cold weather*, Amane thought to himself as he sipped the hot matcha latte that he’d ordered.

Itsuki, now under the impression that he has no allies to speak of, intentionally made a show of sulking for a good ten seconds or so before starting to heartily gorge on his limited-time sweet potato latte.

“Well, moving on,” Itsuki began. “You’re fine hanging out with us, but are you sure you ain’t tired or anything?”

“If this was all it took to get tired, then Kadowaki would be run ragged every single day,” replied Amane.

“Hmm. Well, we do make sure to take proper rests during club activities, and it’s not as mentally taxing compared to serving customers, so it’s not *that* bad, I guess,” Yuuta clarified. “I mean, I’m running because I enjoy it. But what about you, Fujimiya? You don’t get stressed from working?”

“Not particularly. It’s not like I totally enjoy serving customers or anything, but most of the customers are on the calmer side since they tend to be older in age. My seniors are kind to me, not to mention polite, and they taught me the ropes carefully. Sure, I might feel pressured at times because of my shortcomings, but the environment itself isn’t stressful.”

Not even a full month had passed since Amane started working, but from the bottom of his heart, he was grateful that Ayaka had introduced him to this particular part-time job. Gaining skills from customer service would likely be useful in the future, and he found it a blessing to be able to work alongside such good-natured people.

Frankly, Amane believed that half of what made a job into a great job depended on one’s coworkers, so he was especially thankful to have a work environment with calm and supportive employees.

I’ll give her something as thanks when I get the chance, Amane promised to himself, shrugging his shoulders as he swirled his paper cup around in a

circle.

"It really is a great workplace. So much so that it's wasted on me, I reckon."

"That's good to hear," Yuuta replied. "The work environment is incredibly important when it comes to having a job, after all. There's no way I'd wanna be part of a workplace that sees its employees as disposable pawns."

"Yep. You bet I would've quit right away if it was like that. It's a part-time job, sure, but that doesn't mean we don't have a right to choose which one we want. Our mental and physical health take priority, and Mahiru'd probably hate the idea of me working at a place like that."

"She really loves you, doesn't she?" Yuuta teased.

"I… don't think that has anything to do with what we're talking about, y'know."

Amane looked at Yuuta, thinking, *He just felt like saying that, didn't he?* but Yuuta simply responded with a bright smile, so Amane turned to look away, now a little embarrassed.

"If I'm not mistaken, you do work at a café, right?" asked Itsuki.

"Yep, it caters more to a wealthy customer base, though. However, the food and drinks are all so good, that it's no wonder we charge a lot for them."

The café placed heavy emphasis on the quality of the coffee beans. They were carefully selected based on their origin, roasting levels, and how they blend, and this attention to detail was unmistakably obvious in the taste of each cup. Needless to say, it wasn't just coffee that they prided themselves on—they also took great care in adjusting the taste of their other menu items, including food, although there weren't that many to choose from. This attention to taste resulted in the café becoming a hidden gem of sorts, and a place loved by its regular clientele.

Knowing this, Amane couldn't help but wonder who on Earth Fumika really was. Even her own niece, Ayaka, seemed to have trouble fully understanding her, and this only left Amane feeling even more confused.

"Just askin', but, has anyone ever hit on you while you were there, Amane? Happens often, right?"

"What's with your impression of cafés, man… No. Nobody has. I do get some compliments from some calm and composed ladies, telling me that I'm cute, but it's more like they find my clumsiness endearing, like they're looking at me with the eyes of a grandparent or something."

There were quite a few older ladies and gentlemen who watched over him with a warm, or perhaps, gentle smile as he was a new and inexperienced member of staff. While Amane hadn't made any major mistakes so far, he had made his fair share of minor ones, all of which they graciously overlooked. Treated with so much understanding, Amane felt both grateful and somewhat apologetic.

Put simply, there were plenty of elderly people who often spent their time at the café leisurely. Since there were few younger customers, there hadn't been any real opportunity for girls trying to hit on him.

Besides, there were other employees who were more outgoing and physically attractive than Amane was. Even if someone did come in with the intention of flirting, they would most probably go for one of them instead.

The most Amane had gotten was a casual remark from a woman of his grandmother's age, saying, "I would love to introduce you to my grandchild," but of course, he had a girlfriend and politely declined her offer.

"You've got this… appeal to older people, I guess. You're always gentle and polite, and it shows in the way you act." Yuuta shared his thoughts.

"I'm serving customers; of course I can't carry myself sloppily... Well, given the clientele, they must prefer someone quiet and modest like me. They talk to me quite often, after all."

"Wouldn't that make you popular?"

"Kinda. But only as someone to strike up a conversation with," Amane clarified. "And things like gender and age have nothing to do with it. The atmosphere's rather relaxed, so even the other experienced staff will start chatting with the customers when they're free."

This was likely because it didn't have the feel of a common coffee chain, but rather came across as a gentle and relaxed space with a welcoming atmosphere. More than anything else, the fact that many of the regulars were easygoing and benign allowed the café to maintain its air of peacefulness.

"Imagining you all popular with the madams sure is amusing," commented Itsuki.

"Hey now… it's not like that. That's disrespectful to them. You gotta stop these weird fantasies of yours."

"The fact that I can *actually* see that happening is a little scary." Yuuta piped up.

"Not you too, Kadowaki…"Amane shot him a bewildered look, but Yuuta wore an even more serious expression in response, which prompted Amane

to make a firm clarification.

"Not a chance that'd happen."

After all, Amane already had someone he truly loved with all his heart and had practically promised his future to. There was no way he would ever be swayed by other women; in fact, he was confident in the fact that he wouldn't even be tempted. Moreover, the other party likely wouldn't want Amane to make a misunderstanding like that, either.

Good grief..., Amane sighed, to which Itsuki shrugged his shoulders before taking a glance at his wristwatch.

"Now then, looks about time," he said.

"Time for what?" asked Amane.

"About time I returned you to your rightful owner, I guess?"

"C'mon…"

It was no lie that Amane belonged to Mahiru, but she wasn't the possessive type, nor would she get jealous over him hanging out with his fellow guy friends. However, Kadowaki also agreed, saying, "Oh, right. You've got a point," which only left Amane bewildered.

"It's not quite five o'clock yet, but it's getting colder and the sun's already setting. Should we call it a day here? Either way, we probably all have plenty of things to do when we get home."

"Well, I guess so…" Amane went along with the suggestion.

"Then let's call it a day here. I'm freezin'," Itsuki said, turning towards the park entrance.

Having promptly decided to head home, Itsuki appeared eager to leave, but all of a sudden, he changed his mind. He turned back to Amane.

"Hey, Amane."

"What is it?"

"Tomorrow, there'll be plenty of things I'll wanna say, and plenty of things I'll wanna ask. So prepare yourself."

Amane was taken aback by Itsuki's grin and his sudden, yet strange comment as he left. Yuuta, now letting out a bittersweet smile, also bid him farewell. "As do I. See you tomorrow, yeah?"

Conflicted, Amane felt like he'd been left behind in an odd manner. He tilted his head and wondered what was going on before heading home.

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Upon arriving home, Mahiru greeted him like she usually did. Or not. Instead, she came up to him while showing the biggest of smiles. Her eyes sparkled brightly, and her unreserved smile looked both soft and gentle. But above all else, the faint blush that spread across her cheeks was clearly a testament to her high spirits.

"Welcome home, Amane-kun."

"I'm home. Seems like you're in a pretty good mood."

Amane was glad to see Mahiru in such a good mood, but he had no clue as to why she was like that. It was the norm for her to greet him with a smile once he arrived home, but she never seemed as happy as she was today.

He couldn't grasp the reason, so he was left feeling rather puzzled. However, Mahiru, seemingly oblivious to his confusion, simply smiled even more.

"…From your reaction, it seems like you really didn't notice anything today, Amane-kun."

"Notice what?"

"I find it a little troubling that you have completely forgotten what day it is, but… today is your birthday, you know?"

Hearing Mahiru's slightly exasperated tone, Amane involuntarily let out a sudden, "*Ah!*"

"Honestly, geez. …Happy birthday, Amane-kun."

"…I completely forgot. I don't give much thought to stuff like this when it's about me."

While it was odd for him to be reminded of his own birthday by Mahiru, it had entirely slipped his mind otherwise. He hadn't been aware of it at all. Plus, Mahiru wasn't aware of his birthday last year, either. Over the past few weeks, Amane had been so preoccupied with getting used to his part-time job, not to mention his daily training, jogging, and studying. With that, he'd completely forgotten about it.

To begin with, while Amane considered birthdays a milestone, he rarely felt the need to be conscious about them. This was likely a big part of the reason he'd forgotten, given that he tended not to celebrate his own birthday. Back when he lived with his parents, they would celebrate the occasion properly, but ever since he started living on his own, he stopped giving it much thought. That way of thinking had led him to now.

"It matters to me, you know?" Mahiru made clear. "I am truly grateful for

this day, Amane-kun, as it was the day you were born. Without you, I would not have learned how to truly trust and love someone."

She smiled awkwardly at the fact Amane had forgotten, and gently took his hand.

"Thanks to you, Amane-kun, I learned that love is a feeling that truly exists around us. Now, I can live knowing I feel genuine happiness. Happiness that rises from the bottom of my heart. I am incredibly grateful that you were born, and that I met you."

Her eyes, now shining with a soft, warm light that was very different from when they first met, gazed at Amane. The hand that held his was warm, as if embodying the heat that Mahiru held for him at this very moment. It conveyed a gentle, yet incredibly comforting warmth.

"Thank you for being born, and for coming into my life… Thank you so, so much."

Hearing her voice, and seeing her smile, both showcasing her genuine feelings of happiness and joy, Amane felt a blush creep onto his cheeks. He realized then, that the feeling of being appreciated and blessed in such a manner could cause his body to heat up. The feeling was far from unpleasant, and was instead fairly comforting and fluffy, a sensation distinct from having one's body heat rise due to embarrassment. Only after meeting Mahiru had he come to understand such a feeling, but knowing that she cared for him so much, Amane figured that he was a fortunate man indeed.

"…Likewise. Thank you for being so… considerate, and for celebrating this with me," Amane stumbled in his reply, unsure of how to best convey both his emotions, and the heat he felt.

Mahiru blushed shyly. "I have prepared a small feast for you tonight, so please look forward to it. Also, before we eat… I have two things I would like to apologize for."

"Hm?"

Apologize for what?

As Amane tilted his head in confusion, Mahiru lowered her eyes, looking somewhat awkward.

"Erm, it seems that you realized I was trying to hide something from you. I'm sorry for making you worried."

Amane now realized that her strange behavior, which he'd been suspicious about until now, had all been in efforts to prepare for today's special occasion.

“Ah, right. About that… Well, I get what was going on now after seeing all this. I didn’t think you’d do anything terrible to me, Mahiru, so I was more worried about whether I might’ve done something wrong.”

“I cannot see you doing something that would upset me, though,” Mahiru noted. “This happened because I am not that great at hiding things, which in turn made you feel uneasy… I’m sorry for keeping secrets from you, Amane-kun.”

In all likelihood, she had acted that way precisely because she wanted to surprise him on his birthday, and that led her to making preparations in secret. Mahiru wasn’t the type to keep things hidden from Amane, and she clearly felt guilty about doing so. Her secret was more charming than anything else, and given that she pulled it off for Amane’s sake, he had no intention of blaming her in any way.

“It’s not like I’m angry about it, really.” He eased her worries before asking, “…And what’s the other thing?”

“Erm… S-Since I was making preparations for your birthday in secret, it seems that everyone else decided to keep quiet so as to not spoil the surprise. But in reality, they were supposed to celebrate at school earlier today. So, um, because of me, I hindered the blessings that you were supposed to receive today…”

“Ah…so that’s how it was.”

Both Itsuki and Chitose had already known about Amane’s birthday, and given how considerate they both were, they wouldn’t hesitate to celebrate a friend’s special day. The fact that nobody had mentioned a thing the entire time was certainly a major factor in why he had forgotten what day it was.

They were in on Mahiru’s little secret, which was why they stayed quiet. Amane figured that they invited him to hang out after school just to keep him occupied for a little while, as well.

“*Those guys*...” While Amane muttered that somewhat irked line under his breath, he knew better than anyone that he meant it in good faith.

Mahiru looked apologetic for what she’d done, and Amane was at a loss for how to respond. Her head was now pointed dejectedly toward the floor.

“Hmm…,” Amane gently tapped her head. “Truth be told, I don’t think it matters too much; not the date, the location, or whether they were able to give me their blessings in person or not. I mean, I completely forgot about it because of how busy I’ve been lately, and it’s not like they *have* to celebrate it today, right? I think they’re being considerate in their own way.”

“But still…” Mahiru’s hesitance rang clear.

“I’m going out on a limb here, but they probably believe that I’ll be happiest if I accept the celebration that you prepared for me, Mahiru. That’s why they all worked together to keep it a secret, I think.”

They all had the desire to celebrate Amane’s special occasion in their own way, and that led them all to cooperate with Mahiru. Even if he wasn’t given words of celebration on the day itself, Amane didn’t mind. He was fully aware that they were wishing him well without being told.

“I realize that I’m blessed with thoughtful friends who care about me, and just knowing that makes me feel celebrated. There’s no rule saying they can’t do it indirectly, and I don’t judge friendships based on whether they do that or not, anyways.”

Different people had different ways of celebrating, and if this was their way, then that was fine by him. Amane was never the type to quickly judge others based on their words alone, nor did he remember becoming that kind of person. Plus, the relationships he had built were not at all shallow. Their feelings alone were more than enough.

Nevertheless, Mahiru still looked a tad dejected at the outcome, prompting Amane to let out an awkward smile. He stroked her head tenderly and gently peered into her eyes.

“Besides,” he began. “By the looks of things, I’m gonna get swarmed tomorrow… So, I ask you to keep me all to yourself today, Mahiru. They’ll probably bombard me with questions, so let’s make sure we have enough to brag about, okay?”

“…Yes.”

Amane adorned the end of his sentence with a mischievous, teasing smile, and Mahiru was swept along by it, breaking out into a smile of her own before nuzzling her face into his chest.

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“…You’ve indeed made quite the feast,” Amane couldn’t help but share his true thoughts, his genuine admiration leaking out as he scanned the array of dishes laid out on the table.

The dishes Mahiru served for his birthday were, in a nutshell, all Amane’s favorites. Usually, she would plan their meals with nutritional balance in

mind, but not today. Perhaps due to Amane's self-proclaimed love for eggs, she had prepared a variety of egg dishes for him to enjoy. But no matter how much he liked them or how nutritious they were, eating too much of the same food was far from ideal, so Mahiru typically limited how much he'd consume, but it seemed that those restrictions had been lifted just for today.

The most eye-catching dish on the table happened to be the *omurice*, a dish consisting of fried rice covered in a hard, omelet-like shell, which Mahiru then topped with beef stew. She didn't make this dish often, as not only did she have to start preparing the dish a day in advance, it also cost a considerable amount of time and labor to make.

Other dishes laid out before him ranged from *chawanmushi*, a variant of egg and custard; to a potato salad served with plenty of boiled eggs; to even *tamago kinchaku*, a dish combining both fried tofu and soft boiled eggs simmered in dashi stock and soy sauce. The servings were of typical size for your average high school boy, but the sheer variety of food was nothing to scoff at, and they consisted purely of Amane's favorite foods. While there was an obvious lack of vegetables, that was more due to his love for eggs rather than him disliking his greens. [10]

"This is an assortment of your favorite dishes, Amane-kun; I made them without any consideration for nutritional balance or a specific cuisine. It's okay to indulge yourself once in a while." Or so Mahiru said, but she promptly followed it up with, "We can simply have an *extra* helping of vegetables tomorrow to make up for it," before letting out a gracious giggle.

Her cheeks were faintly tinged with joy, clearly delighted that Amane had taken a liking to her surprise.

"Oh, speaking of which," she continued. "I will dish up some *dashimaki tamago* for tomorrow's breakfast. Since I made a lot of food for our dinner, I have a feeling that they would be more delicious after resting overnight. I shall also prepare your favorite salmon to go with it, Kyoto-style. Would miso soup with tofu and white radish be okay, too?"

"Sounds like another feast for the morning…," Amane commented. "But then again, what's in front of me is lavish enough of a meal already."

"Hehe. Please enjoy it while it's still warm. Today's beef stew turned out particularly tender, if I do say so myself."

"Awesome! Simply nothing beats a good *omurice* with beef stew. It's justice."

Although Amane wanted to jump up and down in joy at this rarely served

favorite of his, he held himself back, and put his hands together in gratitude.

"Thanks for the food." Without forgetting to thank her for the food, Amane immediately took a bite of the beef stew *omurice*, a smile unconsciously spreading across his face.

The beef was so tender it could be cut with a spoon, and when it reached his mouth, it bore a succulent and moist texture that was incredibly delicious. The high quality of the meat was evident from the first bite.

This careful combination of the stew's rich flavor and the omurice is something to die for, Amane nodded in appreciation. As he reached for the other side dishes, moving at a pace that was fast yet not unrefined, Mahiru watched him with a warm smile as she ate elegantly.

"…Is something wrong?" Amane asked.

"Nothing," Mahiru replied. "It's just that as the one who prepared the meal, seeing you eat everything with such enjoyment gives me a feeling of accomplishment."

"Well, that's because it's *really* good. Even saying it's the best wouldn't be an exaggeration."

"I will be satisfied as long as you think it's the best, Amane-kun. But rest assured, I won't rest on my laurels."

Amane smiled wryly at the relentlessly stoic Mahiru, and he happily continued to devour his food. In the blink of an eye, the plates were soon emptied. There were quite a few dishes, but Mahiru had given him a reduced serving of each, so Amane was able to finish them easily, especially since he'd garnered an increased appetite after getting a job.

Looking at Amane who had neatly finished his meal, Mahiru beamed a satisfied smile, then slowly rose from her seat to place the dishes in the sink. However, just as Amane tried to stand up to help, she told him in a gentle but firm tone, "The star of the day should take it easy," causing Amane to reluctantly sit back down.

Once all the dishes lined up on the table were finished, Mahiru turned back to Amane and wore a beaming smile.

"After dinner comes dessert. I hope it will be to your liking."

"…Would this be what you were practicing in secret, by chance?"

At this point, Amane could take a guess at what Mahiru had been hiding. The occasional sweet scent wafting through the air when he came home was probably from her baking cakes just for him.

"Yes. It felt wrong to serve something that I wasn't satisfied with myself,

so… I made many adjustments to ensure it was to your liking, Amane-kun."

He had wondered why she was worried about gaining weight, but now it all made sense. She had likely been testing different ways of baking cakes and eating them. Depending on what it was, desserts could be high in calories. If she ate each cake that she made, it was no wonder that she found herself concerned about her weight. On top of that, Mahiru hated wasting food, so she probably made it a point to finish everything completely.

"Anything would've fit the bill if you made it, Mahiru… but it would be rude of me to say something that downplayed such effort. I'm happy that you've gone so far for me, but don't overdo it, alright?"

"I didn't overdo it," she reassured him. "…Though I did do my fair share of exercising afterwards."

"So that's why your figure hasn't actually changed, you can see the effort for sure. Your self-discipline really is admirable."

"It's not an issue, because I only gained a small amount, and my waistline hasn't changed at all. Now, I shall bring it over, okay?"

Saying that, Mahiru brought a plate from the refrigerator with what seemed to be a homemade chocolate cake.

She gently placed it down onto the dining table, a small *clink* echoing dramatically through the room as she did so. The cake was already cut into easy-to-eat slices, and Mahiru quietly served a piece onto a plate for him.

Looking at the piece in front of him, it seemed to be a chocolate *gâteau*. Or perhaps, closer to some kind of chocolate layer cake instead. Judging by looks, it was a finely textured, dense cake.

Next, Mahiru carefully added a dollop of whipped cream and a sprig of mint. Appearance-wise, it was still remarkably simple, but certainly elegant.

"I made a type of chocolate cake. You aren't particularly fond of sweet things, Amane-kun, so I thought you would prefer something that would go down easily with a drink. I opted for milk given the cake's rich flavor, so please have them together if possible."

"Following the cook's recommendation is the best way to enjoy a meal, so I gratefully accept."

Since Mahiru had gone to great lengths to prepare it for him, he had no doubt that it would be excellent. Without hesitation, Amane cut out a bite of the chocolate cake with his fork as Mahiru watched over him.

Just as it appeared, the cake had a very fine, dense texture, yielding easily at first, the bottom layer gave it a firm feel when pressed, almost as if it was

two different materials for each layer. Still, he could cut through it easily, so it wasn't heavy despite being so dense. As Amane cut a small piece and gently placed it into his mouth… the first sensation he felt was the intense, rich flavor of chocolate.

The top layer was sticky and gelatinous, and that part of the delicacy felt more like a firm pudding than a cake. Yet, it wasn't all like pudding, either. The bottom layer was clearly a fairly light but finely textured and rich cake, yet it all maintained a mysterious delicate balance that yielded a smooth texture in the mouth, melting and dissolving as he ate.

Not too sweet, yet not at all bland, Amane could definitely pick apart the finer, subtle flavors within the chocolate. He felt as if it had been adjusted to take full advantage of chocolate's qualities.

"…So delicious." His words came from the heart, sincere and without flattery. Mahiru then let out a sigh of relief at his praise, and smiled.

"I'm relieved that it suits your tastes. I was aiming for just the right balance of flavor and texture."

"I can't believe how delicious it is. It's incredible how you managed to make this."

"Hehe. If that's your response, then it brings me immense satisfaction as the maker. It was truly worth the effort."

Mahiru, who giggled like a ringing bell, looked at Amane as he relished what seems to be a chocolate impossible cake with a somewhat mischievous smile. [11]

"By the way, did you notice it?" she asked. "I added a secret ingredient." When asked what it was, Amane closed his eyes, focusing his senses on his taste buds. Amidst the distinct sweetness and depth lingered a rich, astringent aroma distinct from chocolate, which lingered deeply. It was a scent that Amane had recently become accustomed to smelling at work.

"Hm… Coffee? But, uh… *Huh?* Is this… from my café?"

The delicate taste and aroma reminded him of the coffee served at his current workplace.

Though it was a guess he'd simply thrown out, Mahiru clapped her hands together, grinning ear to ear as she said, "Spot on! I'm surprised you figured it out."

"I was just guessing," Amane explained. "But since Kido was in on the secret, I figured that it was possible."

"You're very observant… Oh, and just so you know, I have not paid the

place a visit in person yet. As you may have deduced, Kido-san helped me procure coffee beans from the café you work at, Amane-kun. I am truly grateful to the owner, too. She even helped with suggestions for blending the flavors to enhance the richness and depth of the chocolate."

"So even Itomaki-san was in on it… Explains that feeling I've had recently that she's always smirking when she sees me…"

Amane hadn't expected that Fumika, the owner, would also be involved. He broke out in a cold sweat thinking about the implications for what was to come during his next shift at the café. However, their coffee was certainly delicious, and he could understand the desire to incorporate it into the recipe.

He'd heard that freshly ground coffee was exceptionally good, and Amane had been considering buying a coffee mill and giving it a shot at home. But even then, he hadn't expected to taste it this way.

"Hehe, I only asked Kido-san for help, but somehow the word spread... I'm glad that they were willing to cooperate with me and that you didn't catch wind of it, Amane-kun."

"Honestly, Mahiru…" She didn't seem to hesitate to put in effort for him, and Amane couldn't help but feel bashful.

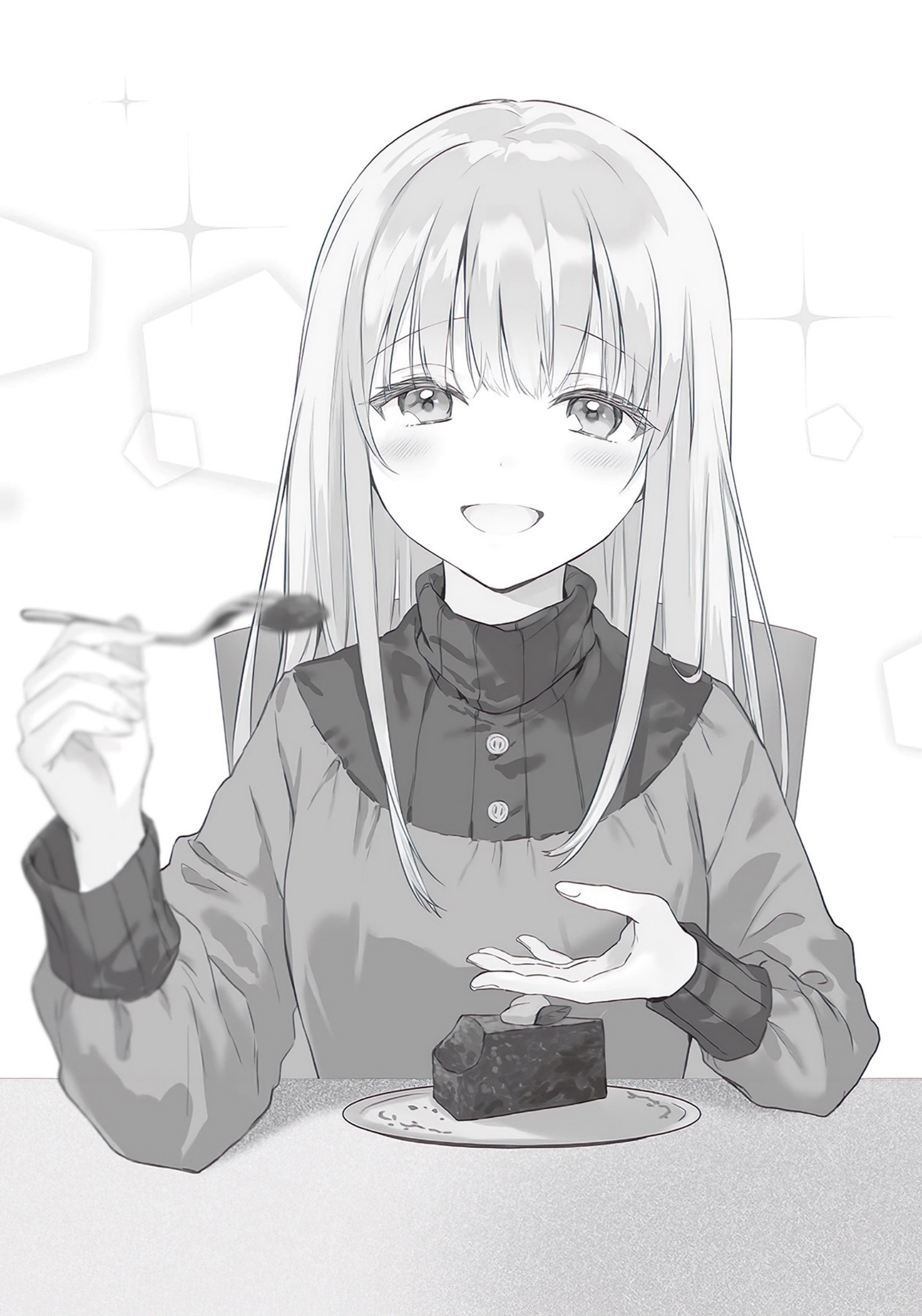
Not wanting to let his embarrassment show, Amane started to serve himself another piece of the cake, but Mahiru gently stopped him, smoothly taking the fork from his hand.

Lifting his head, Amane's gaze met Mahiru's, while a sultry, captivating smile played across her lips.

"It's a special occasion, so shall I feed you? Since it's your birthday, I thought I should at least do that much."

"Huh? N-No, that's a little…"

"No need to be shy."



Ignoring Amane's hesitation, Mahiru smiled sweetly, to sweep away his concerns, as she gently held the forkful of cake up to his mouth. Amane groaned, but obediently ate the cake. Mahiru behaved like this because she knew he'd never come to hate her for it, and while Amane felt his chest prickling with shame, he still appreciated the euphoria that he recognized was also welling up inside him.

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While Mahiru continued to feed him his portion, making Amane feel like he'd die from embarrassment, her satisfied smile never wavered, as she happily watched his flustered reaction.

"Was it delicious?" she asked.

"…It was, but was there really a need to feed me?"

"Yes, there was. You are the star of the show today, after all."

"I'd definitely be a laughing stock if anyone else was here, though… But since it's just the two of us here, it's alright."

If Itsuki and the others had been here, they'd definitely laugh and tease him. Failing that, they'd smile and throw warm, fluffy looks his way. Although the high-spirited Mahiru would likely not mind any onlookers, having looked forward to this day more than he ever would, Amane would undoubtedly writhe in shame more than she likely would have thought.

...I'm definitely gonna get back at her when I celebrate her birthday.

He drank milk to reset his palette, which thanks to Mahiru had grown sweeter for two different reasons. Meanwhile, Mahiru smiled and took something out from her bag, which she had kept by her side.

It was a white box slightly larger than her palm, adorned with a navy-blue ribbon. Not being so dull as to mistake what it was when presented at this time, Amane instinctively looked at Mahiru. Blushing lightly, her cheeks revealed her embarrassment.

"It's your birthday present. I'm not sure if you will like it, though…," she said, sounding a bit uncertain and staring fixedly at the box. She gently placed the box in Amane's palm and shot him nervous glances.

It seemed he could open it here. He figured that Mahiru probably wanted

to see his reaction. *She went out of her way to give it to me now, so I suppose I should open it in front of her?* Amane carefully untied the ribbon and opened the box, revealing yet another velvet box inside.

He thought he'd find the present placed directly inside, and was momentarily taken aback. However, he realized that this meticulous packaging must've reflected Mahiru's desire to surprise him.

For it to be wrapped so many times… What could it be?

Amane wondered even more intensely about its contents and gently opened the inner box. Inside… he found a clip-like item with a subtle white sheen.

Carved in it was a perforated floral pattern. At first, Amane wasn't sure what it was, but he quickly recognized it as something he wore when attending school ceremonies.

"…A necktie pin?"

"That is correct," Mahiru affirmed. "…Honestly speaking, I was at a loss about what to give a man. I considered a common gift like a wristwatch, but I worried you would hesitate if I bought an expensive or showy one, and preferences can differ vastly. Besides, you already have a watch that you seem fond of, so…"

Since Amane always had his smartphone on hand, he generally wasn't one to wear a wristwatch all that often. The one exception was a watch he received from his parents as a gift for enrolling in high school, which he wore only when going out.

They had splurged a bit on it, and understandably, Amane had his reservations when it came to wearing it at school. Plus, he didn't spend long hours outside, so he rarely had the chance to wear it. Despite this, he made it a point to wear it whenever he went out with Mahiru, and she seemed to have noticed the behavior, too.

"That being the case, I chose something you can wear occasionally but wouldn't ordinarily go out to buy yourself," Mahiru began. "Our school allows us to wear tie pins as long as they're not too gaudy outside of ceremonies, doesn't it? I thought I should settle on something you could continue using even as a working adult."

During ceremonies, only tie pins bearing the school emblem were allowed, but otherwise, there were no restrictions. Though, most boys simply found them too much trouble and didn't bother with tie pins at all. Amane was one such boy, and rarely wore one. In fact, he had nearly forgotten their

existence, but if it was a gift from Mahiru, he would likely wear it every day.

Presumably, Mahiru had chosen an everyday item as a gift because she wanted him to wear it often.

“I could have given you a tie, since you need many once you’re a working adult... but as students, our ties are selected for us. School rules are school rules, after all. When the time comes for you to wear a suit, I shall choose another gift.”

“...Yeah, thanks. I’ll use it with great care.”

Even without her saying it, Amane could feel her desire to stay by his side from now on. His heart was naturally filled with warmth and joy. Of course, Amane had planned on it from the start, but feeling this sentiment in return from Mahiru made him both embarrassed and elated.

From now on, I’ll definitely make sure to cherish both you and this tie pin, Mahiru. Always.

With this resolve engraved into his heart, he etched this day into his memory so that he would never forget, and smiled warmly at Mahiru. Seeing this, she let out a relaxed smile, her tension fading.

“I’m glad. I was a little worried whether you’d like it or not. Truth be told, I was aware that it’s not exactly a typical choice of gift for a high school boy…”

“If it’s a gift from you, Mahiru, I’m confident I’ll be happy no matter what it is.”

“Hehe. I know that, but I still wanted to give you something that you needed, Amane-kun. You aren’t materialistic, and you take good care of what you do have, so it was tough to think of a gift.”

Amane didn’t normally wish for anything in particular, and this seemed to trouble Mahiru. All he could do was give a wry smile.

“Everything that you give me will make me happy. That’s how I see it.”

“…That’s a little scary,” Mahiru admitted. “You make it sound like you would be pleased even if I gave you a candy wrapper.”

“I’d assume that you found something interesting about it, like it had a fascinating or cute pattern. And then I’d keep it.”

“I would absolutely *not* do that, though!? If I was going to do something like that, I would just give you the candy itself!”

“Well, I knew you were joking around right now... However, if it’s something you packed your feelings into, Mahiru, I would be happy with anything.”

"…Geez."

While Mahiru's tone sounded dissatisfied, her face, no matter how you looked at it, was relaxed. She was probably just trying to hide her embarrassment.

Let's wear this tomorrow. Amane looked at Mahiru happily before gently putting his tie pin away, looking forward to tomorrow. It was then that Mahiru reached out and timidly grabbed the hem of his shirt.

"There's one last… small present, you could say."

Her tone was hesitant, and Amane tilted his head to one side, wondering if something was wrong.

"Today, I will do my best to fulfill whatever requests you may have. From now, until midnight."

The moment Amane heard Mahiru's words, he nearly choked. He was grateful he hadn't been drinking milk. If he had, he would've undoubtedly spat it out.

Coughing lightly, Amane faced Mahiru, who looked back at him with a determined expression. It seemed she was serious.

"…That line… that line is dangerous…"

"But… we *are* lovers."

"Even… so."

Amane felt like he'd said something similar before, but in any case, it was beyond dangerous for a woman to listen to whatever a man wanted. Even if they were lovers, what's dangerous will always be dangerous.

"…I'm not sure whether I should call you reserved or say you are lacking in your desires, Amane-kun."

"That's not what this is about… You shouldn't do that. You're a girl, after all."

"I cannot imagine you would do anything bad to me, Amane-kun."

"…And what if I did?"

"As I have mentioned before, I would have you take responsibility."

With her innocent, trust-filled gaze fixed on him, Amane unconsciously felt defeated. He scratched his cheek and then gently reached for Mahiru's body.

"I'd take responsibility even if I didn't do anything… dummy."

The truth was that Mahiru was really comfortable around him, and that made her weak against him in a way, and her willingness to accept anything Amane did was more than a little frightening. Even if they had made a

promise to each other, he was a healthy young man, and there might be times when his reason failed him, and he simply could not allow himself to cross that line, for her own good.

It goes to show how much she loves me, I suppose.

But no matter how you slice it, she trusts me way too much.

Amane gently pulled her closer, embraced her soft body as he buried his face in her shoulder. Taking a deep breath, he noticed the scent of body soap was stronger than usual, indicating that she'd already taken a bath.

If I said I wanted *her right here and now, she'd probably nod her head.*

While he had no intention of breaking his promise, he could easily imagine her shyly agreeing, which made him realize just how scary his sugary-sweet girlfriend could be. There was no telling when he'd lose his self-restraint.

A man's reason is thinner than a piece of tissue paper. If provoked, it could easily be shattered. Amane refocused his mind, thinking, *I gotta tread carefully…* and gently let his lips slide toward her cheek, breathing out softly.

Mahiru immediately shivered once he did so, clearly sensitive and extremely weak to his tickling. It would have been obvious to anyone who saw her.

That said, Amane had no intention of letting anyone else see her act like this. Only he needed to know just how sensitive she was. Only he needed to know her weaknesses.

She continued to wriggle about in his arms, but she didn't resist. With a slight smile, Amane gently brought his lips close to her ear.

"…Oh, right… It's been a while, so perhaps I'll have you be my hug pillow again."

Although Mahiru seemed to want him to make a request, Amane carefully chose one within the limits of rationale. Knowing full well that his request would let him spoil her to his heart's content, Mahiru's face flushed crimson from within his arms.

He meant exactly what he said; he wasn't going to go any further than literally using her as a hug pillow, but strangely, he had a feeling that she was having some peculiar fantasies. To be expected, even Amane wasn't up to replicating what they'd done during their last sleepover. Back then, he'd luckily managed to stop himself at the very last moment, but who knew what would happen next otherwise.

"...I only asked you be my actual hug pillow," clarified Amane. "What

were you imagining?”

“N-Nothing at all! Something so improper… I would never!”

“Hey, I never said *what* you were imagining, did I?”

When Amane pointed out that he hadn’t referred to anything specific, Mahiru’s cheeks turned even redder than before, so much so that she almost looked ready to emit steam. Mahiru glared at Amane with half-teary eyes, squirmed, and managed to wriggle out of his grasp.

“B-Baka!” she stammered. “You’re such a dummy, Amane-kun.”

“I didn’t even do anything.”

“Uuu… Even so… You’re still being mean.”

“Alright, I’ll admit that was pretty mean of me. Sorry. You were so cute that I couldn’t help myself, Mahiru.”

Mahiru didn’t mind being touched, and looked adorable as she allowed Amane to tease her. He ended up taking the teasing a little too far, and there was no doubt she would sulk if he kept going. Therefore, Amane promptly apologized in advance, leaving Mahiru unable to voice any more of her complaints. She expressed her dissatisfaction by lightly tapping on Amane’s chest.

Mahiru, without even trying to hide her heavily flushed cheeks, enacted her adorable revenge on Amane, to which he chuckled while stroking her head. But as expected, she still seemed a bit sulky, looking as if she had a small balloon stuffed into her cheeks.

“…I–I shall go and get my change of clothes, so please take a bath while you wait for me, Amane-kun.” Seeing that Amane’s warm smile had remained unchanged, Mahiru had made her escape at last. That said, she was bound to return soon regardless.

Amane, meanwhile, was momentarily taken aback by Mahiru’s rabbit-like getaway, but he chuckled at the feeling that bubbled up afterwards—one of wanting to cherish her.

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Mahiru had already returned by the time Amane finished his bath and made his way over to the living room. She had changed into her pajamas, choosing to wear the light pink bunny-themed pajamas she’d bought recently. Amane hadn’t expected her to wear them today, however, and was simply wearing

his regular pajamas despite having a cat-themed onesie of his own.

Usually flowing down her back, Mahiru's hair was instead loosely tied up behind both her ears, and she looked extremely adorable with the hood on—a very off-duty kind of look, if you will. It was in stark contrast to her attire during the last sleepover. Despite having a jacket at the time, her negligee was quite revealing—enough to shake Amane's sanity. So this time around, he felt at ease.

"…It really suits you. Very Mahiru-like," Amane commented.

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Like, small, fluffy, cute, a bit clingy or lonely… it resembles you a lot…"

Mahiru, like the image of a rabbit, was a bundle of softness, fluffy and lovable, yet a tad lonely. While this differed from the actual behavior of a bunny, it was fittingly symbolic of the somewhat lonely Mahiru.

Amane had meant it as a compliment, but it seemed Mahiru wasn't having it. She glanced up at him with a pouty expression, and upon seeing his damp hair, her frown deepened even further.

"I now understand what you think of me, Amane-kun… But more importantly, aren't you deliberately neglecting to dry your hair when I'm around?" Mahiru scolded him as she fiddled with his hair, asking after only a moment, "Why didn't you dry your hair with the hairdryer?"

She caught on, after all.

Amane smiled bitterly. Whenever Mahiru wasn't around, he made sure to dry his hair properly. However, only when she was around and seemed to have nothing else to do, he would occasionally dry his hair with nothing more than a towel, letting Mahiru handle the rest.

Knowing that it was actually a bit of a nuisance, Amane limited this behavior to every once in a while. It was a subtle way for him to seek her attention and be spoiled. The delight of Mahiru touching him, paying attention to him, was too sweet for him to resist. He knew it was childish, but he couldn't bring himself to stop.

"You're just imagining things… Is what I'd *like* to say, but yes, I did it on purpose. I wanted you to do it for me, Mahiru."

"Goodness me… But since I enjoy it, I don't mind. You simply want to be spoiled in your own way, Amane-kun."

He had mixed feelings at being read like an open book, but the sight of Mahiru's giggly smile left him thinking, *Well, this is fine, too*, while feeling a

tad relieved.

"Please have a seat," she said, beckoning him to sit down on the sofa. She welcomed him with an expression that seemed to say, *It cannot be helped*. However, she was unable to hide her joy, her lips curling into a smile as she turned on the hairdryer.

The hairdryer they kept at home was a silent one, and it hummed quietly as a breeze only a little warmer than Mahiru's hand blew in his direction. He'd already gotten rid of most of the water using his towel, so all that remained now was to finish up by drying his hair of the remaining moisture. Mahiru carefully applied the warm air, saying, "I see you haven't been neglecting to take proper care of your hair. Very good," as she ran her fingers through his hair to check its quality.

Just as Mahiru meticulously cared for her skin, not just for herself, but for when Amane touched her, Amane mostly made sure to take care of his hair in the same way. He figured that doing so would make Mahiru happy, as it would give her a pleasant sensation whenever she touched him.

His hair remained silky smooth thanks to his efforts, and it also made drying his hair easier, as it would no longer snag.

"…I once again think that your hair is naturally lustrous, Amane-kun."

"It's from my parents. It's the soft type of hair, though, so it gets tangled pretty easily."

"But the softness makes it easy to keep it glossy, right? Perhaps I should have given you a variety of hair care products as a present," she half-joked, now having finished drying his hair. She pulled a comb out of nowhere, saying, "Let's make it even more silky," and began to tidy up his fluffy, puffed-up hair. In doing so, she styled his hair in the way she liked best.

"If you'd be happier with me having a glossier hairdo, I can go get some better products."

"I–It's less about being happier… It's just satisfying to touch, and I find enjoyment in combing your hair."

"Then, imma go ask Kadowaki for some recommendations. If it makes you happier, then I'll be happy too."

Plus, Amane was almost certain that she'd touch him more often if he did that. Though, he dared not tell her that was his main goal.

If his personal growth made Mahiru happy, then not only was it worth striving for, but it would also help boost his confidence… But just as he thought this, Mahiru pressed her forehead up against his arm, placing her

comb on the table.

While quietly laughing at her now-familiar way of hiding her embarrassment, Amane watched the rabbit-eared hood on her head twitching with every movement she made, making him smile even more.

“Hey, Little Miss Bunny—looks like all four of your ears have gone pink,” Amane playfully remarked.

“Please don’t say that,” Mahiru blurted. “…You should have worn your onesie too, Amane-kun. I’m the only one here dressed like a cute animal.”

“Then it’ll look like a cat grooming a rabbit’s fur.”

“It would be adorable, right?”

“…I’m fine with you being the only adorable one here, Mahiru.”

While the sight of a cat and a rabbit—a potential predator and prey—getting along so well would be heartwarming in its own right, Amane couldn’t shake the feeling that he lacked the cuteness to pull off being a cat.

He had developed a stronger physique as of late, much more so than it was in the past. Plus, his innocent, child-like features had been slowly but steadily fading from his face. Despite losing his adorable appearance a while back, Mahiru still insisted Amane was cute, which baffled him. But since it boiled down to personal taste, he’d just have to accept it.

Perhaps the blush on her cheeks had cooled down a little, for Mahiru looked up at Amane, and strangely her expression softened as she found some kind of cuteness in his features. Then, intentionally without warning, he stole her lips.

Mahiru blinked several times before blushing once again, but she didn’t resist at all. Rather, she seemed to be delighted, and relaxed her body upon being embraced, as if telling Amane to do as he liked.

He softly nibbled at her, and gently and ever so slowly parted her glossy lips, which reminded him of sakura-colored seashells for a moment. Mahiru meekly accepted him without objecting. [12]

Lately, she had slowly but surely started to accept his affection and began returning in kind, which he found to be utterly adorable.

As he drunk in her quivering voice that faintly spilled out, his heart danced at the sight of the cute little rabbit trembling yet accepting the wolf all the same. It wasn’t as if Amane had gotten used to such kisses either, and frankly speaking, his passion for her was overflowing and he felt as if he was on the verge of losing control. Knowing from past sleepovers that she could get frightened if he were too aggressive, he instead kissed her as gently yet as

intimately as he could.

"…Rather than a cat, I should have bought a wolf onesie instead," she murmured somewhat ruefully as she tried to catch her ragged breath, shortly after their lips had parted.

A grin spread across Amane's face. "If only you did—because then the only adorable one allowed here would've been little bunny Mahiru," he teased, suppressing the embarrassment that welled up from their kiss.

"Meanie."

Mahiru pouted, her lips now even more moist than before, as she then playfully headbutted his arm to express her embarrassment.

"You have been losing all the innocent charm you had when it comes to things like this, haven't you?" Mahiru observed, sounding a tad upset.

"I never had any to begin with."

"Liar. You used to behave like you didn't know what to do…"

"Oh, hush."

It was his first time dating, so him being inexperienced was to be expected. Now, he was able to just about push through both the embarrassment and nervousness that came with acting like lovers, at least on the surface. But it was only natural that he was clumsy at first.

If innocence equated to cuteness, then he'd rather that cuteness belong to Mahiru alone. Amane didn't want to show his awkward side to his girlfriend.

"…Next time, I shall do something that will blow you out of the water, Amane-kun. Especially since I'm always the one getting surprised by you."

In response to Mahiru's quiet murmuring, Amane once again sealed her lips to prevent her from uttering any further schemes. He savored her sweet lips with all his senses.

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After they had kissed for a while, Amane led Mahiru to the bedroom. Despite having been in Amane's room several times and having experienced a few overnight stays, Mahiru seemed a tad nervous, because he could feel the slight tension in her hand as he held it tight.

While chuckling softly at Mahiru, Amane playfully traced her hand with his fingertips to soothe her. He then subtly invited her to bed. Clearly embarrassed, Mahiru sat on his bed thoroughly looking the part of a little bunny about to be devoured by a wolf.

To match her cuteness and endearing appearance, Amane retracted the fangs that showed how close he was to being on the verge of pouncing on his prey. He intentionally chose to gently sit down beside her, and soothingly stroked her head to put her at ease. While he had told her that he wouldn't do anything, her tension was no doubt due to her being in his bedroom.

"I won't eat you up. Like I said, today I'll just have you be my hug pillow," Amane emphasized once more.

"I–Is that so?"

"…Were you expecting something else?"

"I was *not*! It's just that, erm, you're gradually getting more and more…"

"More what?"

"…More composed, and you're getting more masculine, too… It's embarrassing. I–It's not fair," Mahiru stuttered, looking up at Amane while awkwardly squirming.

Amane chuckled slightly, now aware of how well he seemed to be disguising himself. Sure, he may appear composed on the outside, but in reality, he was panicking internally. In fact, knowing Mahiru to the intimate extent that he did only made it even tougher for him to remain composed.

However, he couldn't scare her by being too pushy or hasty, and he thought it would be unmanly if he seemed too nervous, so he was simply trying to appear calm.

"Pretty sure I told you before that I don't actually have any composure. I just don't let it show on my face since it's pretty lame for a guy to get all nervous."

"So if I asked you to show it, you would?"

"Nope."

"That's so not fair."

"You'd just see me getting flustered and red in the face, you know? Wouldn't that be kinda pathetic?"

They had been dating for going on five months now. To his mind, it wouldn't be the best of looks if Amane blushed at the smallest of touches and kisses. Women would likely find a dependable man more appealing, and he figured that she'd be more at ease if he acted calm during intimate situations. However, this didn't seem to apply to Mahiru.

She timidly grasped the hem of Amane's shirt. "…Would it be selfish of me to say I want to see the real you, Amane-kun?"

She asked in a quiet, anxious voice, to which Amane covered his face

with his hand and heaved a quiet sigh. Apparently, his effort to act cool was an unnecessary concern.

"…I want you to understand that I just wanted to look good in front of you because... well, I love you."

Mahiru stiffened for a few moments as Amane embraced her from the side, resting his forehead on her shoulder, but Mahiru soon let out a small laugh.

"You are always both cute and cool, you know?"

"The *cute* part is unnecessary."

"Fufu," she giggled. "…Being able to see both sides of you is my lucky privilege."

Unable to say anything in response to her delighted voice, Amane rolled onto the bed with Mahiru, trying to cover up his embarrassed expression. Trying her best to cushion the impact, Mahiru's tied-up hair swayed to and fro ever so slightly. Given her rapid blinking, however, it must have still caught her off guard.

Under Mahiru's gaze, Amane found his embarrassment to be considerably stronger than hers, but he pushed further, bringing her into his embrace and burying his face in her generous curves.

Perhaps an effect of her bunny pajamas, Mahiru's mounds were warm and fluffy to the touch, yielding supplely. The scent given off from her was lavish, a unique blend of sweetness and freshness so superb that words simply couldn't capture.

If Mahiru had been acting more passionate in that moment, Amane may have gotten more excited, but that wasn't the case. She was instead in full relaxation mode, and since Amane hadn't even considered taking things that step further for the time being, he simply embraced the feeling of comfort and bliss that enveloped his body.

Although momentarily taken aback, Mahiru soon realized that he wasn't going to do anything to her and began running her hand through his hair. It was yet another soothing gesture.

"You're being pampered a lot today," Mahiru commented.

"…It's fine, right? Let me have this."

"Yes, yes."

Amused, Mahiru chuckled, seemingly seeing through his attempt to hide his embarrassment.

"You're rather bold today, Amane-kun."

“I thought I should indulge myself today. By touching you lots.”

“That’s fine, of course. But, how should I put it... you are touching me like you usually do. Erm, I… was expecting you would touch me a little more... directly.”

“Well, yeah—but while I do enjoy touching you, and I do wanna *know more* about you, just being by your side and feeling your warmth is enough for me right now. That’s all I need to be satisfied.”

Lifting his head from her soft peaks, Amane held her delicately, embracing her slender body. He didn’t intend to act on the fantasies that Mahiru once imagined. If he were to do something like *that* every time they spent the night together, Amane was certain he’d lose control of himself before long. He knew she would accept him with an adorable reaction, enticing him to want her more and more without limit.

Still, he really did not intend to do anything tonight.

Just because he was a man didn’t mean that he *always* wanted to do *those* things. After all, simply spending time peacefully with the woman he loved was usually enough to make him happy.

While they may be less satisfied physically compared to their last sleepover, where they touched each other intimately, the emotional satisfaction they shared in this moment was by no means less fulfilling.

Now, the woman he dearly loved and wanted to pledge his future to was nestled close by his side, her gaze filled with trust and love. Nothing else could give him a greater sense of security, happiness, and satisfaction than this.

Just her warmth was enough to leave Amane with a sense of contentment, and Mahiru snuggled up to his chest, telling him that she thought the same way.

“…Me too,” she affirmed. “I am happy just being by your side, Amane-kun.”

“I’m glad. If it were only me, I feel like it’d be kinda unfair somehow. Like I’m finding happiness far too easily.”

“I feel the same way when you are next to me, you know? As long as you are with me, Amane-kun, that is all I need, but…”

“But?”

“I would be even happier if I could touch you.”

As she said those incredibly cute words, Mahiru looked up at Amane, her eyes pleading for permission to touch him.

“Oh, you want to touch me? I don’t really mind, but I can’t imagine a man’s body being all that pleasant to touch.”

“Really? Since I do not have much muscle myself, I think it is a good thing that you are muscular… Like when I trace your stomach, it feels firm and rugged.”

Having gotten his permission, Mahiru reached out and touched Amane’s chest and abdomen hesitantly with her fingertips, which made him squirm slightly from the ticklish sensation.

Ayaka’s influence is definitely showing here… But I guess it’s fine. As long as Mahiru’s enjoying herself, I don’t really mind. Realizing that Mahiru seemed to be having fun touching him like this, Amane then recognized that he may be going too soft on her.

“My daily training has started to pay off now, I think. Guess you could say I’ve graduated from being a bean sprout?” Amane joked.

“I think it is coming along nicely—your body is firm, and you do not have any unnecessary fat. You feel sturdier compared to before.”

“…Yeah, don’t bring up the past. I was super skinny back then.”

Being reminded of the time when he first met Mahiru made him feel unbearably embarrassed. Though Amane now had a reasonably toned body with muscles, he used to have a very unreliable physique.

He didn’t have much fat, but his body was so skinny it could be described as straight-up weak, definitely a far cry from a muscular build. Looking back on it now, he felt like punching his past self and telling him to work harder.

Mahiru did seem to prefer his current physique, so Amane was glad that he’d put all the effort in to better himself. The more he trained, the more stylish he looked when he put on his clothes, which helped prove that his decision to become a fitting partner for Mahiru was the right one.

“Fufu. But regardless, I had still thought you were a boy back then. I realized the difference between our bodies when you carried me on your back that one time.”

“Well, that’s a given. …You have a super slim body shape, after all.”

Mahiru was soft and petite thanks to her own constant efforts, but even with aspects that she couldn’t change, like her bone structure, she was still rather delicate. It could even be said that she was petite overall.

“…I may be petite, but I am tougher than you think, Amane-kun.”

“Still doesn’t change the fact that you’re delicate, though. I often think that I have to touch you gently. Feels like you might break otherwise.”

“You say that, but you have never touched me using that much strength before.”

“My point still stands,” Amane insisted. “…You know how much I want to cherish you, so being gentle is something I have to be mindful of. You *are* important to me, after all.”

To the best of his ability, Amane wanted to be both kind and gentlemanly toward Mahiru. He planned to cherish and protect her for the rest of his life going forward, so he needed to be careful not to hurt her in any way.

It wasn’t that he wanted to be overprotective, but no matter how much Mahiru worked on improving herself, she would still remain a delicate woman. She was naturally weaker and less robust than men due to gender differences, and Amane felt that he must be considerate of that.

Amane fully understood that Mahiru didn’t want to be coddled, so while respecting her independence, he wanted to treat her gently and make her feel comfortable. He wanted to make sure that he’d never make her cry.

Then, Amane whispered in her ear that he intended to spend the rest of his life making her happy, making his determination clear. Mahiru blushed in response, and Amane’s earlier embarrassment paled in comparison to how red Mahiru’s face became as she softly replied, “Th–Thank you very much…”

“…It’s your birthday, Amane-kun, but I feel like I’m the one receiving all the blessings today.”

“No, no. *I’m* the one with all the blessings, okay? And besides, the date’s already changed.”

Amane had received a lot from Mahiru, and his desire to cherish her was ultimately born solely from his own feelings. It wasn’t something that Mahiru had to worry about. Plus, the date had already changed before they had realized it—his birthday had now passed.

They had been cuddling and kissing on the sofa and bed, and before they knew it, more time had passed than they had thought. While it may have been a short birthday, Amane felt he had received more than enough happiness.

“Oh, you’re right… I–It’s such a shame; I wanted you to make a few more requests…”

“Time sure flies, huh. I guess I can’t ask for anything more now.”

“So, what were you planning to ask?”

“…I was hoping you’d maybe give me a kiss before we go to sleep.”

They had been doing nothing but kissing until just a little while ago, but

they had all been initiated by Amane. It was rare for Mahiru, who was more shy than Amane, to take the initiative herself. Even though she seemed to enjoy kissing, she was simply too embarrassed to take the lead.

Given today was his birthday, Amane figured he might as well ask her to kiss him the way *she* wanted to, which was something that he'd be embarrassed for others to know.

He considered the request to be quite significant, but for some reason, Mahiru looked puzzled and slightly exasperated.

"…You really do lack desire, don't you? I was hoping you would ask me for something a little grander than that."

"I already feel so satisfied, what else would I ask for? I have you—my girlfriend—by my side, celebrating the day I was born with me, and sharing warmth. That's enough for me. It's not that I don't have desires, but right now, consider me satisfied."

"Then…" Mahiru paused. "That means I must be greedy."

"You? Greedy?"

Amane had always considered 'greedy' to be the furthest thing from Mahiru's personality, but she nodded and frowned slightly, a serious look showing on her face.

"Truth be told, I am lonely when you go to work, Amane-kun, and I always find myself longing for you to return home quickly. I also worry whether women are trying to make advances on you. You are a very handsome man, Amane-kun. What would I do if you were to become popular with the ladies? I often wonder about the possibility. I do not intend to interfere with your decision, and I am not at all worried about you cheating, but part of me still feels anxious. I cannot help but think, 'Please don't leave me.'"

Mahiru nestled her face in Amane's chest before confessing that she didn't want to be a hindrance. Yet…

"I don't ever want you to leave me," she added in a murmur. "I want you to touch me more. I want you to stay by my side forever and ever. …I must be greedy for thinking this way. Perhaps my love is too heavy a burden…"

Amane broke out into a smile upon hearing Mahiru's heartfelt confession.

Mahiru was expressing how much she cared for him, and how important he was to her. She longed to constantly be by his side, and that—was proof of how much she loved him.

If anything, he felt truly blessed to have her as his lover.

As Mahiru had described her strong affection as greed, Amane smiled slightly, pouring a little more strength into the arm he'd wrapped around her back, embracing her harder.

"…Chances are that my love's a lot heavier than yours, Mahiru. Much more so than you think."

Mahiru had described her love as being heavy, but if that was the case, then Amane's was heavier. He had absolutely no intention of letting her go.

There may be a chance he would swallow his bloody tears and let her go if it meant Mahiru finding true happiness, but otherwise, that notion held true. Amane was determined to make her happy himself and would spare no amount of effort to achieve that.

Amane would never shift the responsibility onto Mahiru by insisting it was for her sake. He was doing his best to make her happy on his own accord, living his own life responsibly while shouldering the weight of emotions that he himself could not fully endure.

"In my family, our love is heavy because we are devoted. And I'm no exception either. Perhaps you haven't fully realized it just yet, Mahiru, but having heavy love isn't about being possessive or imposing restrictions—it's about the depth and intensity of the feelings we have for one another. That's how it is for me. I won't ever let you go no matter what happens. I don't want you to look at anyone else other than me. …So, sometimes I wonder what I'd do if you ever grow tired of me."

Amane was aware that his feelings were heavy.

Knowing that having a shallow relationship would be rude to Mahiru, Amane had proposed a serious relationship with the intention of spending their entire lives together, but this arrangement would probably seem too heavy to outsiders. Promising a lifelong commitment with her while still attending high school. He was trying to do just that, and calling it 'heavy' simply wouldn't cut it.

And yet, Mahiru smiled happily. Her smile was beaming with pure joy and delight.

"To be loved to such an extent, I consider myself truly blessed," began Mahiru. "Never letting me go, only looking my way… Would you not say that is ideal?"

"Is it really?"

"It is," she affirmed. "…I am the same, Amane-kun. I cannot let you go anymore, so the feeling is mutual. I'll never allow you to look anywhere else,

okay?”

Having heard her say something that was totally out of the question, Amane simply nodded at Mahiru, who smiled back at him in satisfaction as she shifted her body slightly upward.

A devilish smile played on Mahiru’s well-defined face as she drew closer.

“I shall give myself to you, Amane-kun, so please give yourself to me, okay?”

She whispered passionately, and their distance closed.

Their faces were so close that their breaths intermingled, and in the next moment, they quickly shortened the distance, pressing their whole bodies together as their faces touched.

Their lips lightly brushed against each other, a kiss so gentle, and yet it ignited a fiery passion. It brought a sense of reassurance and happiness, a pleasant mix of sensations that made their hearts swell with warmth.

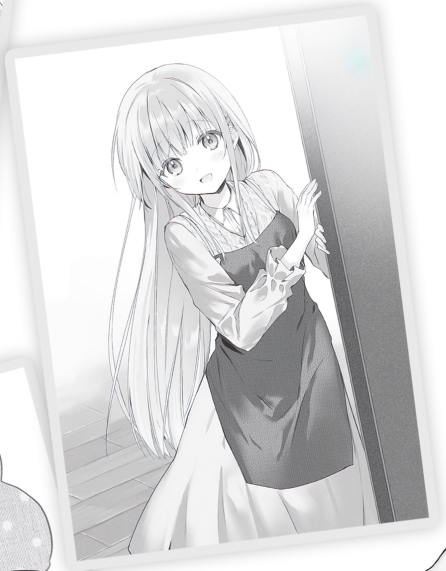
Despite only lasting a few seconds, it gave them a kind of satisfaction different from that of a deep kiss. Then, Amane met Mahiru’s gaze and smiled.

Without a doubt, they both only had eyes for one another. There was nothing to worry about.

“…Good night, Amane-kun. Sweet dreams.”

“Good night, Mahiru.”

Snuggling up to Amane, Mahiru let out a blissful smile that implied, ‘*We belong together*,’ and Amane too returned a peaceful smile, gently closing his eyes.



Animate SS

The Awareness of Being Loved

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 8 from the Animate Bookstore

Ever since Mahiru had spent the night at Amane's house, there was a slight shift in his attitude. That said, it wasn't as if he had drastically changed, and Amane's affectionate demeanor and devotion to Mahiru certainly remained intact. However, his attitude towards Mahiru had changed, just a tiny bit, nothing more.

Mahiru would have a tough time putting this difference into words if asked, but if she had to describe it, then the most accurate way to say it was that Amane had become slightly less reserved and the way he carried himself exuded an air of confidence.

Ever since they began dating, Amane had decided to be confident, and worked hard to back that up, walking with his head held high when by Mahiru's side. His initial feeling of eagerness was replaced with genuine self-assurance, and it became second nature for Amane to stand beside Mahiru confidently.

Mahiru now understood that Amane becoming accustomed to doing so was not out of arrogance, but instead from the true confidence he had built up from the realization that she loved him from the bottom of her heart—in the same way Amane loved her.

"You know that you're dearly loved, don't you?"

"...Yes, I do."

Back when they were changing clothes for Physical Education class, Chitose had inadvertently discovered Mahiru's hickey, which was hidden rather well with concealer under her clothes. Chitose brought up the topic over lunch, and Mahiru couldn't help but avert her gaze.

A few days had passed since Mahiru had been marked, and since it had already faded considerably, she naïvely thought that a moderate amount of concealer would do the trick. But Chitose's eyes could not be fooled. Mahiru

was grateful to Chitose for not causing a ruckus in the middle of the changing room, but part of her hoped that she would've pretended to not see it in the first place.

"I can't tell whether he's getting bolder or wimping out when it counts the most. He's definitely keeping things discreet though," Chitose said.

Although Chitose hadn't pressed for the nitty gritty details, Mahiru wasn't confident in her abilities to deceive Chitose nonetheless, so she remained cryptic. Chitose only smiled bitterly in response, both impressed and exasperated.

Mahiru herself, though, couldn't deny that she felt just a little… disappointed at the time. She was delighted that Amane, who was trying his best to restrain himself, had touched and kissed her in his yearning for her. And as his lover, Mahiru was ready to advance onto the next step in their relationship. It wasn't as if she suddenly wanted to rush ahead, but deep inside, there was a faint glimmer of hope that Amane would show that he loved her fully as a woman.

However, after Amane shared his feelings with her, and his vow, all of Mahiru's disappointment was completely swept away. She was truly touched by the deep love he harbored for her, and the realization that Amane cared so much for her filled Mahiru with a burning, overflowing sense of happiness.

Mahiru felt so delighted that she wanted to shed a tear at Amane's decision, a firm choice he had made while taking the future into consideration. A few moments later, she spoke.

"...Amane-kun is always thinking about me. I could not be happier."

"I know that all too well," Chitose replied. "I'm painfully aware how much Amane loves you, and anyone can tell from a glance that he cherishes and adores you, Mahirun."

"I'm fully aware of that myself."

If she wasn't truly loved, the option of waiting—or enduring—wouldn't have crossed Amane's mind.

No matter how often others liked to call Mahiru *pure* or *innocent*, she was well aware that high school boys could have strong sexual desires. She could even sense from their everyday interactions that Amane desired her from the bottom of his heart. But even so, Amane had chosen to endure said desires silently, and not rashly act on them. Out of his respect for her, he vowed not to cross the line until he could take full responsibility.

There was no way Mahiru would think she wasn't loved after seeing how Amane treated her with such care and attention—putting her at the forefront of everything that he did. In return, it was only natural for her to cherish Amane, just the way he was, from the bottom of her heart, too.

"...I have to get the same feelings across to Amane-kun. I won't lose to him when it comes to this."

"No, no. You've probably got the message across plenty already. Just make sure you don't go overboard and bring everyone around you to their knees."

"...Why would that happen?"

"*Weeell*, so many people already get caught in the crossfire when you two flirt with each other. Anything more could prove deadly. That's why!"

Chitose fanned her face with her hand, signaling, *Winter's coming, but it's so hot in here…* and Mahiru could only hang her head in embarrassment, finally realizing how openly she'd been flirting with her boyfriend.

Bookwalker SS

Two-Way Recharging

Obtainable only by Pre-Ordering Volume 8 through Bookwalker JP

Amane was off work today, so he sat in the living room and worked through his homework, just as he did before he had a job. Mahiru was sitting beside him as she usually did, but kept glancing at him strangely.

Amane wondered if something was off about his appearance, but he had checked himself in the mirror before, and didn't notice anything particularly out of the ordinary. He didn't think he had forgotten something related to Mahiru either, so he couldn't figure out the meaning of her stares.

"Something up? You've kinda been glancing over at me a lot."

"P-Pay it no mind. It's nothing."

Amane tilted his head, mostly because Mahiru was still staring in his direction as he asked that. With the way she was looking at him, he didn't think it was because of something he had done, but rather, Mahiru seemed to want to say something to him. Amane advised, "If you have something you want to say, don't hesitate to tell me, alright?"

"Ah—It's nothing much, erm… rather than having something I want to say, I was simply worried about something. I was lost in thought."

"If you're alright with me saying so, I can give you some advice. There are times when it's better to talk to someone about it than to keep it to yourself. Of course, if you don't want to talk about it, then I won't try to force you to talk."

It seemed that Mahiru had something on her mind, and she was worried about whether or not to discuss it with him. Amane, convinced that something was worrying her, nodded his head in encouragement and looked at Mahiru, inviting her to begin talking if she was okay with confiding in him.

"N-No, it's not a serious problem… I was just thinking of what to say."

"And?"

"...Erm, you see… I-I really, really want to touch you, Amane-kun."

“...Come again?”

For a moment, he couldn’t understand what she had said and let out a confused exclamation, but Mahiru’s panic after saying her desires out loud was far from normal; her face was bright red, and she flailed her arms in desperation.

With tears in her eyes, “That’s not what I meant!” Mahiru insisted. “I-I didn’t mean it in a weird way! Erm, I haven’t had much time to be close to you since you started working, so, erm, I feel like I haven’t had enough contact with you lately, so... I would like to spend more time with you, Amane-kun.”

“Hm? If that was the case, you should’ve told me sooner.”

“I-I mean, there’s only a limited number of days off... You must be tired, so it would be bad to only spend that time with me, no? You may want to hang out with Akazawa-san or Kadowaki-san, have something else you want to do, or just take a rest, so I thought it would be bad to be selfish.”

Apparently, she was worried about whether he was tired from his part-time job, had some other obligation, or if there was something else he wanted to do instead. He couldn’t help but smile at her cuteness for a moment, but then the feeling turned into exasperation.

“There’s no way I’d think you were selfish. You know that I don’t consider that selfishness. Rather, it’s asking to be pampered, which isn’t the same as being selfish at all. It’s not like I’ve refused you every time, so just try talking to me. You shouldn’t limit yourself in asking for what you want for yourself.”

Amane wished she would tell him when she was pained by waiting too long, and he didn’t think he had become the kind of man who would call that being selfish.

“Besides, even if I say no, it’s because I happen to be a bit busy right now,” Amane explained. “I’d absolutely welcome it once I’ve finished my homework, okay? All we have to do is make time for each other for some pampering, so don’t just assume it is impossible without asking.”

“...Okay.”

“Now that you understand, c’mere.”

Once Amane spread his arms wide toward his cute girlfriend, Mahiru, who was usually very reserved when being pampered, she instead yelped this time. “Huh?”

“Didn’t you want to touch me?” Amane asked.

“B-But, you were doing your homework, Amane-kun. It doesn’t have to be right now.”

“I haven’t been given a deadline for this yet, so satisfying your heart takes priority, Mahiru. And also…”

“Also?”

“I want to recharge, too.”

Mahiru wasn’t the only one that was feeling lonely. Even for Amane, who was getting exhausted working at a part-time job, which he hadn’t gotten used to yet, touching his girlfriend was a necessary part of healing time.

Since Amane was being so honest, Mahiru panicked a little before blushing and said, “...Okay.” She then leaned against Amane’s chest, entrusting her body to him.

Gamers SS

A Secret Notebook

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 8 from the Gamers Bookstore

After eating his dinner and washing the dishes, Amane returned to the living room to find Mahiru sitting on the sofa, completely absorbed in some kind of small notebook that she seemed to be reading.

Amane figured that it'd be rude of him to sneak a glance at its contents, so he tried not to look at what was written, though he tilted his head at Mahiru's enthusiasm towards the notebook. He sat down next to her, asking, "Uh, Mahiru-*san*? What might you be reading?" But in response, Mahiru shuddered intensely and looked up at him in a panic.

"*Eh?* A-Amane-kun?!"

"Ah, well… You looked really eager when reading that thing, so I couldn't help but interrupt. Should I not have disturbed you?"

"N-No, that's not the case, okay? I-I was just surprised that you started talking to me all of a sudden, erm… that's all."

After a few moments of silence, Amane asked, "...Why're you acting evasive? Are you reading something indecent by chance?"

Amane joked with her knowing that it couldn't possibly be the case, but Mahiru pursed her lips and clammed up. This made him panic instead.

"...Were you actually reading that kind of stuff?"

"I-It wasn't anything indecent! I-It's not like that…"

"If you don't want to share that notebook, Mahiru, then I won't pursue it any further, okay? Doesn't seem like I should ask about it, so I'll just excuse myself now…"

"Th-That's not it! I don't mind showing it to you, Amane-kun. But… erm, y-you won't get angry or upset, will you?"

"I don't think you could do anything that'd make me angry, Mahiru."

"Well, erm…" Mahiru paused for a moment before continuing, "Th-Then, here you go."

Mahiru resigned herself to her fate and closed the notebook. She handed it over to Amane, but he lost all strength the moment he laid eyes on its cover. Written across it in large, bubbly, and colorful letters was: *Ayaka's Special Guide to Ideal Muscles*.

Amane hadn't actually thought it was anything truly obscene, but that it was simply something she'd rather not show to a man, but not a single person would have imagined that such a monstrosity would come into existence, much less for it to be in Mahiru's possession.

With a swift flip through the notebook, Amane was greeted with elaborate descriptions and drawings of different muscle training methods, the most efficient order to do them in, the ideal nutritional balance, the most effective post-training muscle massages, and various other notes jotted around the edges that one would usually expect to find in specialized muscle training books. It was such an intricate collection of notes that Amane's strength was being drained instead.

"...I'll have a word with Kido later. Mahiru, did you perhaps acquire a new fetish…?"

"Th-That's not true! W-Well, putting that aside… You're, erm, always working your hardest, Amane-kun… and I want to help you out, too. I was thinking that it would be better if I was more mindful of the best food I could make to support you."

It seemed that Mahiru only wished to help him and had consulted Ayaka for advice. It was true that Amane tended to train tirelessly, but he couldn't help but feel that her own preferences had some influence over her decision.

"So that's how it was. You've been thinking about a lot of things for my sake, and thanks for that. You're always a big help with the meals you make."

"...Uuu. E-Erm, there's a hint of my selfishness in there, too…"

"Yeah, I know. But since that selfish side of you helps me to improve, I don't think it's a big deal. You can't do everything without a little bit of selfishness here and there, after all. And besides, you basically never tell me how you'd like me to look, Mahiru, so I'm kinda curious what your ideal type is. Is macho what you'd like?"

Amane would've seriously considered changing his training routine to get that kind of body shape if Mahiru preferred a bodybuilder-like figure, but that didn't seem to be the case, for she shook her head side-to-side.

“Y-Your current physique is more than enough, Amane-kun. I think that a slender and toned body is wonderful… B-But I feel like I won’t be able to look you in the eye if you train even harder, so this is sufficient.”

“Alrighty, then. Time to step up my game.”

“How did you come to that conclusion!?”

Mahiru’s tastes, which she had tried so hard to keep hidden until now, had been revealed. Since Amane was going to be training anyway, he wanted to try to build himself in line with her preferences, which is why he had spoken up, but Mahiru simply shook her head once more, her face beet red.

That aside, it seemed to be where Mahiru’s tastes lied, so Amane looked through Ayaka’s handy little notebook, vowing to work even harder so that he could impress his girlfriend.

Melonbooks SS

Loneliness in a Lover's Absence, and a Secret Practice

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 8 from the Melonbooks Bookstore

Mahiru has had a lot of free time on her hands now that Amane started working part-time.

To be precise, she had plenty of things to do. From her homework, to study sessions, exercising, housework, and even attending to her health and beauty routines. However, something of a void had opened up in her heart, and she felt the loss of nothing being there.

Mahiru knew full well that Amane would fill that void, but she was all the more surprised to find that she felt lonely after being apart from him for only a few hours. This revelation left Mahiru bewildered.

Naturally, Mahiru knew that Amane would return to her and that he'd started working with some kind of goal in mind, so she had no intention of blaming or stopping him. However, despite knowing that she was alone, there were times when Mahiru had unconsciously tried to call out to Amane as if he were still sitting beside her.

Even Mahiru herself acknowledged that it could be a sign of a serious problem, but she tried her best to carry on as normal. She spent as much time as she could making dinner while she waited for Amane's return in efforts to not worry him. Though Mahiru wasn't intentionally trying to act like the ideal girlfriend, she still made an effort to not hold Amane back or become a burden to him.

Conscious of her affection for Amane, which was so passionate that calling it an obsession wouldn't be strange in the slightest, Mahiru whispered, "I wish I could loosen up a little more…" under her breath and gently took off the apron she was wearing.

A sweet fragrance had completely permeated the house, and while that in itself was no problem, the smell had stuck to Mahiru, too. She had to take a bath to carefully remove the scent before Amane returned home. All she

could do was deodorize herself lightly when she didn't have much time to spare, but today, she had enough leeway to take a proper bath.

Mahiru looked back at what she was baking while it was half-done and beginning to cool down, then she glanced at the clock on the wall and confirmed that she had plenty of time left. After that, she sighed.

Amane was yet to return home.

Even after Mahiru would finish baking her sweets, it would take her some time to wash herself and return to Amane's apartment to prepare dinner.

I wish I could call this convenient.

Mahiru was secretly practicing how to bake cakes at home in preparation for Amane's birthday, but her obsessive and perfectionist nature was beginning to surface, and she still hadn't made a batch that she was satisfied with.

Amane being a part-time worker and returning home late was convenient in that regard, but there was no avoiding the loneliness that it also brought. Though, engrossing yourself in cooking was a valid method to distract yourself from such loneliness.

Mahiru wanted to please Amane as she did so. She made prototypes to practice, pursuing a taste that Amane was bound to be delighted by. But as she had expected, it was too soon for her to handle such a recipe by herself.

Despite their reduced size so Mahiru could fine-tune the taste, no matter how small she made the portions it was natural to worry about gaining excess weight after eating cakes day after day.

"...I hope I am not letting my weight get out of control with all of this," Mahiru fretted.

Of course, it'd be wrong for her to claim that she'd gain weight the second after she ate them, but since she had been eating sweets almost every day since she began to practice, Mahiru was still justifiably worried that it would accumulate. Now that Amane had set out to become someone he could be proud of, Mahiru could not let herself become careless about taking care of herself, no matter the reason.

Mahiru quietly murmured, "Let's get Chitose-san and Kido-san for taste testing," as she rubbed her stomach before heading to the bathroom, determined to give herself a firm massage in the bath.

Suruga-ya SS

Her Popular (?) Boyfriend

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 8 from the Suruga-ya Bookstore

"*...Hmph*."

"What's that stony-faced look for…?" Amane asked. "Oh, you ironed for me? My bad. I put it off and was gonna do it after I went shopping. Sorry you had to see me being so sloppy. You really helped me out here. Thanks."

After returning from a round of grocery shopping, Amane put everything he bought into the refrigerator and found Mahiru sitting in the living room with a stern expression, ironing board out. Next to her was a stack of ironed and neatly folded clothes, so she must've seen the clothes draped over the sofa and ironed them before him.

Amane apologized, reflecting on the fact that he should have ironed before going out on his little shopping trip, but Mahiru looked at the pile of folded clothes as if telling him, *No, that's not what's wrong*...

Amane wondered if there'd been anything strange mixed in with the clothes, but since he had dried his underwear in his bedroom, that shouldn't be the case. "Then what are you…?" But… as soon as he looked at the stack of clothes once again, it finally clicked. "Ohh, I see. So that's what it was."

What Mahiru had been staring at was Amane's work uniform. Naturally, Amane had washed it along with his other laundry, but Mahiru was able to touch his uniform because of it, which was something that she hadn't been allowed to do before. For Mahiru, who wanted to see Amane in his work outfit as soon as she could, this was tantamount to flaunting the most dangerous and tantalizing forbidden fruit in front of her while all she was allowed to do was wait.

"Sorry I haven't shown it to you yet, but could you please hold on a little longer?" Amane requested once more. "I'd like to get used to wearing it first."

"I-I know that. I *can* wait properly, you know? B-But Kido-san saw you wearing it, didn't she?" Mahiru asked.

“She did, but only because she came to check up on Kayano.”

It seemed that Mahiru had caught wind of Ayaka seeing him in his uniform, and she looked pretty jealous as a result.

“Th-That’s so unfair… I want to see you wearing it as soon as possible, too…,” she said petulantly.

“Kido did apologize for that. She said that she felt bad for seeing it first despite how much you were looking forward to it.”

“I know it cannot be helped. But I still feel fidgety whenever I think about it… In the end, I’m worried that you’ll become too popular with the ladies, Amane-kun.”

“Why would that be something that’d happen…?” Amane asked, confused. He was unsure as to why Mahiru reached such a conclusion just because she wanted to see him while he was working.

“B-But… after Kido-san went to the café, she came up and said, ‘*Fujimiya-kun’s so popular, isn’t he~?*’ and then she laughed…”

“You’re telling me *that’s* her idea of being popular…?”

It was questionable whether being cared for by an aunt or uncle two or three times his age marked the onset of his popular phase, especially when they had much more life experience than he did.

“B-Besides,” Mahiru continued. “I heard you were popular with young girls, too.”

“You do realize you’re talking about a girl as tall as my waist, right? If you’re that worried, why don’t you come and see for yourself?”

“I-It’s okay. Erm, I’m just feeling uneasy on my own…” Mahiru sounded a little hesitant. “It’s technically a good thing for my boyfriend to be popular, you see.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Amane remarked, and Mahiru’s face began to heat up in embarrassment. “I’m narrow-minded when it comes to things like this, aren’t I?” she whispered, throwing herself onto his chest. Thinking that her childishness was endearing, Amane gently and silently welcomed her with a smile.

Toranoana SS

How Parents See Their Children

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 8 from the Toranoana Bookstore

"You know, our Amane really takes after you, Shuuto-san. Doesn't he?"

Roughly two weeks had passed since Seijo High School's cultural festival, held at Amane's school, which happened to also be Shuuto's alma mater.

As a result of Amane talking about his part-time job, Shihoko softly muttered that line as she reminisced about spending time with her cute son and soon-to-be daughter.

Shuuto was at a loss for a moment, wondering which trait in particular she was referring to, but Shihoko was likely referring to Amane's determination and earnestness, so she must've been talking about that.

"Well, Amane does resemble me the most out of the two of us, Shihoko-san. He'd be more on the proactive side if he took after you a little more, I reckon."

"He's such a late bloomer even though he's *my* son. That must be how he managed to win Mahiru-chan's trust, I think."

"I think Amane's prudent nature is a good thing. While I do think it's also important to let loose and enjoy life as a teenager, Amane's approach in tackling *that* was correct."

They had heard from Mahiru that Amane tended not to act until he was certain, and that he was the type of person who would prepare until he was ready, and that attitude was, in fact, the beginning of her love for him. Mahiru had long since gotten used to his cautiousness, and was convinced that he would ensure that whatever he planned would be accomplished smoothly and efficiently, too.

Shuuto knew that as a woman, Mahiru may have felt impatient, but given Amane's personality, pushing the issue was absolutely impossible, he thought. If anything, they had become intimate faster than Shuuto expected.

Before Amane and Mahiru started dating, Shuuto's only chance to meet them was during New Year's, but even then, he was able to discern that Mahiru didn't think badly of Amane, and realized that Amane must also have taken a liking to her since he allowed a girl to enter his personal space, so he must have relaxed his guard, Shuuto thought. Therefore, Shuuto was not at all surprised when he heard that the two of them had started dating.

"You were a lot more assertive than one would expect, Shuuto-san, right~? I thought you were being nonchalant, but then you surprised me when you suddenly acted so boldly."

Presumably, Shihoko had been astonished at Shuuto taking the reins to—in a straightforward manner—advance his relationship with her, even settling quickly on their marriage. Shihoko *had* conducted attacks of her own, but thereafter, Shuuto pressed forward confidently, continuing to take the lead. In the end, this all appeared to have left a lasting impression on Shihoko.

"You know what they say. *There's no time like the present*, right? I truly believed that you were the only life-long partner for me, Shihoko-san, hence why I took action like I did."

"Fufu, that's true, too. Besides, you made your moves after you estimated it wouldn't go bad, right? How calculating."

"You think so?"

"I do. I still think that was also rather cheeky of you."

"But you adore that side of me, too. Don't you, Shihoko-san?"

"...See? This is what I'm talking about. Seriously."

Shuuto flashed a tender smile at Shihoko, who sat beside him, and caressed one of her cheeks with the tip of his finger. Shihoko turned away, embarrassed, tapping his thigh once in retaliation. But it was clear that she wasn't averse to it as she let him do as he pleased, not brushing his finger away.

Unbeknownst to her son, Amane, Shihoko was also quite vulnerable to people's strong advances. In that respect, one could certainly say: *Like mother, like son.* While appearing assertive, when pushed, the tables would immediately turn with Shihoko easily giving in. However, this cute side of Shihoko was a secret just between her and her husband.

"But, well, how he only acts after building confidence really takes after you, Shuuto-san. Though it seems that Mahiru-chan's getting a little antsy nonetheless."

“Though in exchange, he properly takes action once he’s reached that certainty, and I think Amane’s a lot sharper than I was in regards to planning ahead and working hard to achieve those plans,” Shuuto admitted. “He’s my pride and joy.”

They had heard from Amane about why he’d been wanting to work part-time. Even after contemplating the future, including studying for exams, he hadn’t turned back on his decision. He asked for permission, instead, and had done so in a way that fully conveyed his determination. Despite knowing that Amane was not present in the room, Shuuto smiled, as if praising him for his efforts.

Needless to say, Shuuto informed Shihoko, with whom he shared the family’s finances, of Amane’s resolve and what Shuuto intended to grant him, which Shihoko then readily also approved. Shuuto also told her about Amane’s part-time job, and she was moved by how much effort he was putting in for Mahiru.

“Fufu. I think our Amane takes after me in how once he’s charmed by someone, he goes all in.”

“Hey now, you don’t suppose he also takes after me with that?”

Shuuto chuckled, saying that she ought to not leave him out of it, and Shihoko laughed strangely in response. “I’ll allow it, this one time, that clearly he takes after both his parents here,” she added, happily.

Vol. 5 Throwback SS

What Shall Not Stay a Fantasy

Included with Volume 8 Special Edition + Duplicate Art Standee Bundle (¥14,000)

After observing the bright blues of summer peeking between a cluster of nearby sunflowers, coupled with the fluttering of flaxen-colored hair through the wind, Amane found himself likening it to a scene straight out of a painting.

The tinge of blue reflected in his eyes was noticeably different from the subdued, paler hues of spring skies; the refreshing, yet nostalgia-inducing hues of autumn skies; or even the deep, crisp, and clear hues of winter skies. Amane looked around. Those very shades of azure, enveloped within a dazzling veil of sunlight, somehow made him feel as if he were dreaming. The clear skies overhead still felt unreal despite the blazing sun shining down directly onto his body, bathing him in its warmth.

Beneath such a sky was a cluster of blooming sunflowers, which only served to make the scene seem all the more dream-like.

“What’s wrong, Amane-kun, spacing out like that? Are you not feeling well?”

Above all else, what made it all the more difficult to accept this as reality was the presence of his girlfriend, whose figure synergized exceptionally with the vibrancy of the summer sky above and the sunflowers below; yet, she did not fully blend in with them. Amane had brought Mahiru outside for a stroll and they ventured to a sunflower field not too far from his parents’ house. But Mahiru, dressed beautifully in a blue and white sailor one-piece dress, suited the scenery so remarkably well that Amane had forgotten this was real life.

Mahiru approached Amane, her braids swaying as she did so, and she peered up at him with a worried look. Her appearance was vividly emblazoned upon the scenery, yet it seemed almost fleetingly impermanent.

Amane slowly shook his head, agog at the spectacle, trying to convince himself of its actuality.

"...Ah, it's nothing. I'm not sick or anything like that. Everything's just so incredibly pretty, so much so that I was wondering if it's all actually real."

"*Fufu*, I know it's all very pretty, but it's reality. You see? It's cold to the touch, isn't it?"

Mahiru giggled, touching Amane's cheek with the tip of her finger, letting out a clear yet adorable laugh, akin to a tolling bell. The delicate touch of her hand was slightly chillier than Amane's own body temperature. Mahiru's cool, slender fingertips nudged and pinched at his cheeks, as if to awaken him from his sleep, imparting Amane with a soothing and brisk sensation. She was tender with her actions, not hurting him in the slightest.

"If you're so captivated by the scenery, it seems you have taken a liking to it as I have, Amane-kun."

"Ah… You're right about that. I'm glad I was able to come here with you, Mahiru."

It was all fitting to such a degree it didn't feel real, but Mahiru gently smiled next to him and withdrew her chilly hand from his cheek, now entwining it with Amane's unoccupied hand.

That seemingly unreliable yet undeniable sensation slowly brought Amane back to reality.

"*Fufu*. I'm glad that I was able to come here with you, too, Amane-kun. Thank you for bringing me to see such stunning scenery. Let's come here together next year as well."

Holding onto his hand tightly, Mahiru smiled with as much—no, even more—refreshing exuberance than the lush sunflowers, the glittering rays of sunshine, or even the deep, clear blue skies that surrounded them. Amane felt the haze draped over his thoughts rapidly evaporate.

Amane couldn't consider their intertwined hands a fantasy. This was the blessed reality Amane had obtained, a reality with a future he would now gladly embark upon.

At that moment, the background seemed to fade. Yet, with Mahiru as the centerpiece, a view so beatific and picturesque emerged, which only served to accentuate Mahiru's beauty.

"...Yeah," Amane replied slowly and thoughtfully. "Next year, too."

Mahiru beamed with more joy and life than any sunflower as Amane conveyed each and every word with exquisite effort, confirming their future plans.

Melonbooks 2023 Winter Fair SS

Home Café: Another Way to Enjoy a Drink

Obtainable by spending 10FP (¥5,000) during the Melonbooks 2023 Winter Fair Event

"It's snowing, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it sure is."

Watching the snow falling relentlessly from the uninspiring, colorless skies from beyond the window, Amane and Mahiru couldn't help but sigh as they whispered to one another. That, paired with howling wind that seemed to drown out everything, even their voices, caused them to feel more lethargic than usual.

They had planned to go out together for the majority of the day since it was a rest day, but those plans were buried by the unceasing curtain of whiteness that swept across their field of vision.

Amane had a bad feeling when he checked the weather forecast a while back, but he certainly hadn't expected it to be this bad. The conditions outside were intense to say the least.

As such, they had decided to cancel their plans for the day. Even if they went out today, they'd only end up chilled to the bone. Amane was against them heading outside just for Mahiru to face such cold conditions.

"I'm really glad today's a rest day," he began. "If it was a weekday, everyone would be despairing right about now. Both students and the employed."

"I agree. If there were no warnings issued, we would be walking toward school in this weather instead, and people from the workforce would have to trudge through a hellish commute," Mahiru replied.

"Would the trains even be running in this weather, to begin with?"

"I wonder…"

While a region with frequent snowfall would no doubt have the appropriate countermeasures in place, unfortunately, their area didn't get that much snow normally. However, judging by the amount of snow

falling—which was better described as a raging torrent than a gentle trickle—it was only a matter of time before most public transportation services would grind to a halt.

Realizing that despite it being a weekend, there were plenty of people still working in such conditions in order to keep the gears of society turning, Amane put his hands together and inwardly gave them his gratitude.

Thank you for your continuous efforts.

Peering outside, Mahiru noted, "It does not look like the snow will stop for at least the rest of the day." Pure white snowflakes of considerable size began to pile up. While a powdering of snow would be considered pretty, these flakes were big enough that one could tell they would accumulate significantly in no time.

"With this much snow coming down today, no doubt we're gonna be in for quite a thick covering tomorrow."

"Removing all of the snow will likely be quite the challenge, too. Especially for transportation," Mahiru noted. "I have a feeling that public transport will be unable to run. It makes you wonder how much money will be lost because of events like these."

"I don't even wanna think about it," Amane nodded, noticing that Mahiru's pragmatic and realist nature, which he had picked up on during their conversations last winter, hadn't changed in the slightest. He quietly looked at her as she talked somewhat seriously, but despite that, she appeared to show a hint of anticipation.

"…If it piles up enough, do you think we can make a snowman?"

While she was devastated that they had to cancel their plans, it seemed that Mahiru didn't dislike snow itself.

"Hmm," Amane got to thinking. "It'll probably pile up enough for us to make a decent snowman, yeah. Looks to be the type of snow that doesn't melt that easily."

"In that case, I shall give it a try if it stops snowing by tomorrow."

Last year, they had managed to make a snowman the size of a palm, but not the kind that could be rolled into shape, so she must've wanted to give it a shot.

The snow kept us from going out, but if she's found even a little enjoyment from it, then I'm glad, Amane thought, smiling quietly. "I'll go get us some drinks," he added, gently moving away from Mahiru as she continued to gaze out the window.

Originally, they'd planned to head out to a café, but Amane suddenly remembered something his seniors had taught him at work, and decided to put it into practice. *Since we've got the chance, let's recreate the classic café atmosphere here at home*, he decided, reaching out for the milk in the refrigerator.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

"Mahiruuu, come on over. I've prepared our drinks."

As he carefully placed the nearly overflowing drinks onto the table, Amane called out to Mahiru, who had been staring outside in a daze. He'd been making quite the racket in the kitchen, but Mahiru didn't seem to pay much attention to the noise. She swiftly turned around and began to make her way over to Amane.

As she did so, her gaze caught what was on the kitchen table, and her eyes widened in surprise.

"…Did you make all this yourself?" she asked.

"Sure did. How about we have a home café today?"

On the table was a drink with a snowman-shaped figure floating on top, which had slightly melted and spread out. Amane placed a tray of baked snacks from the snack box next to the 3D latte art he'd made, and had successfully pulled off creating a café-like ambience.

Well, it's no café-grade latte or cappuccino, but still…

As one would expect, Amane didn't have his own espresso machine, so he opted to use an electric frother that he'd bought from a hundred-yen store instead. Using it, he foamed the milk before setting it on top of the cocoa, creating his own makeshift version of the drink.

Amane had put into practice the tips that he'd been given: how to make fine yet dense foam, how to separate the foam to encourage quicker drying, how to best apply the heat, and how to warm up the spoon so as to not break apart the foam on contact. When it came to actually shaping the foam, however, it was outside of his expertise. As a result, he ended up with a squishy and somewhat flattened two-tiered snowman.

As its creator, Amane was a tad embarrassed by the slightly distorted face he'd made using chocolate sauce and chopsticks, but considering it was an

amateur's handiwork, it wasn't half bad. He simply considered its uneven face to be one of its charms.

"I tried to give you a glimpse of what's to come tomorrow," Amane smiled. "A warm snowman's not too shabby either, right?"

Mahiru's eyes bounced back and forth between both Amane and his little snowman latte art, and her previously low-spirited expression quickly began to light up in a joyful glimmer of excitement.

And then, with a shy smile and a look of touched appreciation, Mahiru lowered herself to sit down next to Amane, who had done so first, and snuggled up close.

"Where did you learn such skills?" Mahiru asked.

"From my senior at work. They said it'd make you—my girlfriend—happy, so they taught me how to do it. I think I did pretty well for my first attempt, if I say so myself."

"From my perspective, it looks like you managed to nail it on your first try, and on the spur of the moment, too… You're *always* like this."

After thinking for a moment, "……Am I being blamed for doing something wrong here?" Amane replied.

"I am not blaming you for anything, but you really *are* always like this."

GA Bunko 16th Anniversary Toranoana SS

The Feeling of Wanting to Pick on the One You Love

Purchasable from Toranoana during the Jan. 2022 GA Bunko 16th Anniversary Fair

"This SS was presumably released sometime between Volume 5.5 and Volume 6, and it takes place before the end of Volume 4 in the story's timeline." — *Indi*

"I heard boys like to pick on the girls they have a crush on, but is that really true?"

Mahiru was relaxing on the living room sofa when all of a sudden, she asked an unusual question with a curious expression on her face. They were currently watching television together, and a romantic drama showing a quarrel between two childhood friends, a man and a woman, was playing. As the conversation flowed, the characters touched upon the idea that boys have a tendency to tease girls that they like, and it seemed that this tidbit left Mahiru intrigued.

"Hm…? It depends on the person, I'd say. Everyone's different.

"I thought that was the case," she replied. "…And what about you, Amane-kun?"

"Me? Well, I don't fully understand the desire to pick on them, to be honest."

Amane only had one point of reference since the only girl he'd fallen for was Mahiru, but not once had he wanted to be mean to her, or treat her in a way that she would dislike. One could say that he lacked the assertiveness to actively approach someone in such a way, but Amane believed that even if he *was* the assertive type, he would still treat her kindly, like he usually did.

"If I were to guess, they're probably embarrassed to show their interest in the girl, so they choose to make fun out of her or play the fool to see how she reacts, or perhaps just to get her attention. It's not like I don't understand their mindset or anything, but I can't imagine it'd be a good move to pull off in reality."

As a fellow man, Amane believed that they probably struggled when it came to effective communication, but he couldn't imagine himself doing the

same. Rationally speaking, the more one thought about it, the clearer it became that they hadn't thought things through.

"No matter how you cut it, they're just going to end up on the girl's bad side," Amane continued. "Any girl who would like the boy for being mean to them must be in the minority, I reckon. I don't think anyone enjoys being made fun of or bullied."

"Well, that's true. If you like somebody, it's better to express it straightforward and honestly with your words and actions. They should not use being mean as a mask or a substitute for showing their affection."

"…I agree," he replied after a pause. Hearing her comment about expressing one's love with words and actions left Amane with a slight sting in his heart, but it was his just deserts. There was nothing he could say in response.

"What was *that* just now?" Mahiru asked, looking suspicious.

"Nah, it was nothing."

For the time being, Amane couldn't see himself confessing his feelings for her, so he tried to play dumb instead. Mahiru gave him a puzzled look, but he couldn't say anything in return. She turned herself away for a while, seemingly having given up on an answer. Before long, however, Mahiru sighed and began to speak.

"What would you think if the roles were reversed, Amane-kun? If I were to start teasing you or treating you harshly, how would you feel?"

"Honestly, I don't think I'd mind if it's you, Mahiru."

"Why do you say that?"

"I know you'd never do anything that'd go against your morals, and I would be able to recognize and accept whatever you did since we trust one another. I'd only see the way you'd treat me as nothing more than normal banter."

Hypothetically, *if*—no, Mahiru *did* tease him from time to time, but she never touched on any topics that would make Amane feel uncomfortable. She had both common sense and common decency, so she never crossed the line of offending him.

"You're awfully level-headed about it," Mahiru remarked.

"Of course. At the end of the day, it just boils down to how much you trust each other, and whether you can respect boundaries. If the relationship lacks trust, even making fun of the other person a few times can become a

nuisance. And even if there *is* trust in the relationship, cross the line once and you've dropped the ball."

"I could not agree more," she nodded quietly.

His curiosity now piqued, Amane asked, "…And, uh, I'm really just asking, but… what would you do if I started being mean to you, Mahiru?"

Seemingly surprised, Mahiru let out a blink before responding. "Let's see…," she said, gently turning her head in the opposite direction.

Amane felt a small hand grasp at the end of his sleeve, and found himself captivated by the sudden sensation. At that very moment, Mahiru looked down toward the floor with a sorrowful expression. Her caramel-colored eyes, so clear and full of earnest intensity, seemed to shimmer with a mixture of emotions.

"…Please don't be mean to me."

Amane's body tensed up instinctively, now faced with her hesitant, yet still soft-spoken voice, and her eyes that brimmed with emotion as she glanced up at him ever so slightly. However, Mahiru snapped back to her usual demeanor in a blink, nonchalantly saying, "If I did *that*, I could make you freeze up with an immense feeling of guilt and wrongdoing, and you may even start to behave suspiciously, too. For those reasons, I would let it slide."

Frozen stiff, Amane was stunned by the sudden change in her mannerisms, but upon realizing that she had said that to poke fun at him, his cheeks naturally began to heat up.

She's right. If she looked at me like that, all I'd be able to do is apologize profusely while not being able to move a muscle… And what about it!?

That said, I don't intend to ever make her sad like that, Amane promised in his mind as he reached his hand out toward Mahiru's cheek, dissatisfied at being teased. She made an adorable expression as he gently pinched her soft cheeks, but Mahiru, still with stretched cheeks, scolded him playfully with a silly face.

"You're so mean!"

So she said, but the tinge of happiness that colored her face as it lit up revealed that she actually enjoyed the banter.

A dynamic like this must come from a place of mutual trust, I bet…

Taking Mahiru up on her lenience, Amane savored the moment by switching to caressing her cheek, appreciating how smooth it felt.

Blu-Ray Vol. 1 Exclusive Special Story

Cherry Blossom Viewing with the Angel

書き下ろし特別小説: Included with the Anime Blu-Ray Volume 1 DVD Package (¥10,890)

"*Will be released separately from Volume 8* alongside three similar SS released with each of the 4 Volumes of the Anime Blu-Ray Disk." — *Indi*

Afterword

Author's Message

Thank you ever so much for picking up this book.

I am the author, Saeki-san. I sincerely hope you enjoyed the 8th volume of *The Angel Next Door*.

That said, this volume kicked off with Mahiru-san's unexpected wish—did you find it enjoyable?

As a girl, Mahiru wants Amane-kun to adore her, yearn for her, and treasure her, which is why she had begun to apply so much pressure on him.

Fundamentally, Amane-kun is the type of person who wants the person he loves to be as happy as she can, and he wants to cherish her the best that he can. This makes him err on the side of caution sometimes, but I am surprised that he was able to withstand it all despite that… Whether he is a gentleman or a coward, that's for you—the readers—to decide.

As a result of Amane-kun putting up with it all, I feel like something tremendous will come to pass in a year's time, or so I imagine I would think if I was an outsider. As the author, however, I do wish to depict the scenes as parts of their daily lives.

Moreover, Amane-kun started working part-time for the sake of fulfilling his oath. Likely, he'll manage to study, go to work, and train his body all at the same time since he tends to be rather efficient. Amane-kun's lifestyle will become a lot more lively, and he will be more active than he has ever been.

Keep doing your best for Mahiru and yourself from now on, Amane-kun!

Once again, Hanekoto-sensei has drawn such wonderful illustrations for this volume! But now I want Mahiru-san to prepare my breakfast as well… Isn't *yakisake* and *dashimaki* just the best breakfast ever? Don't you agree?

With each passing volume, Mahiru-san's smile softens just that little bit more, and she shows her feelings more openly than before. She's so cute! Despite the *illustration included in the Special Edition* of the volume being especially cute and endearing, even to the point of making you squeal,

Mahiru also exudes an erotic and irresistible aura.

By the way, there were several candidates for Mahiru's outfit, and I was the one who recommended the shirt for her to wear. Yes, it's my hobby. I just couldn't help myself.

I start trembling when I think about how the anime will have started by the time this volume goes on sale, and my stomach aches from the pressure. But I can't stop myself from getting excited just thinking about being able to watch an animated and moving Mahiru-san. **I hope you all enjoy the anime adaptation, too!**

And last but not least, I would like to thank everyone for your help and support.

To the head editor, the GA Bunko editorial staff, the sales staff, the proofreaders, Hanekoto-sensei, the printers, and everyone who worked so hard to publish this work, as well as everyone who picked up a copy of this book—thank you very much!

I'll see you all again with the next release! Thank you for reading all the way to the end!

✧ + ✦ + ✧

Hope you enjoyed, Fan translator, proofreader, and editor — Indi, writing.

First off, I would like to thank ***Dil*** for providing the volume's raw and *Bookwalker* Short Story; ***aritakun*** for the *Animate*, *Gamers*, *Melonbooks*, *Suruga-ya*, and *Toranoana* Short Stories; ***MeteoR*** for the *GA Bunko 16th Anniversary Toranoana* SS; ***Trevor*** for the *Melonbooks 2023 Winter Fair* SS; and ***Kine*** for the *Anime Blu-Ray Vol. 1* SS, which will instead be released separately from the Volume 8 Fan Translation, given its separation from the main story, and the fact that there will be 3 similar short stories releasing soon that are better translated and distributed together as one bundle.

The fan translation you have read is a result of the efforts of many volunteers, which is the primary reason for its long release time. For those wondering, the total word count is: 81,714.

The biggest improvement to quality in this translation compared to volume 7 is the accuracy checking added into the workflow, which ensures

that the translation is accurate and explores Saeki-san's intended and implied messages properly while keeping the prose more than comfortable to read even in English.

I would like to thank ***Zel*** for helping with this task, along with ***Blank***, ***Kobori***, ***Asakura Yoruto***, and ***Stem***; as well as ***existence is pain***, ***Dil***, ***Almighty***, and ***SoTipsyy*** for helping to proofread the English text. Next, I would like to raise a glass to our editor, ***Doram***, for performing final edits on chapters and elevating the quality of our work.

Do make sure to tell them how much you appreciate the blood, sweat, and tears that they shed for this in our discord server over at ***discord.gg/otonari***, and thank you for reading our fan translation.

On top of Souji and Ayaka slowly becoming two of the more integral characters to the story, we had a few new characters introduced in this volume: *Oohashi* ***Rino***, *Miyamoto* ***Daichi***, and *Itomaki* ***Fumika***.

While some events in the story had been given a lot more detail in the Light Novel compared to the Web Novel, the storytelling is otherwise almost exactly the same—except for one thing. Due to the moving around of the plot points in Volume 7, one of the main events at this part of the WN has now been pushed forward to what will presumably be Volume 9. It isn't a *bad* thing, though. It makes for better storytelling and pacing in the long run, but the wait is real.

The next volume has been confirmed to be Volume 8.5, another Side Story volume like Volume 5.5, so it may be a while before we are able to read new content that has not yet been written in the Web Novel. Volume 8 of the Light Novel adapts up to chapter 263 of the Web Novel, which can be read over at ***http://otonari.moe***, but there are 266 total chapters in the Web Novel with no expected new releases, so there are only 3 extra chapters to read at the moment if you would like to advance in the story without waiting for Volume 9.

Don't forget to support the series in other ways!

See the Fan Translator Page for the relevant hyperlinks, and please purchase the official English Translation by ***Yen Press*** once available in your country. As of this translation, they have English translations up to Volume 5, with Volume 5.5 set to release on September 19th! I hope you will continue to enjoy this series!

Note: This fan translation is NOT for resale, nor should it serve as an alternative to purchasing the official translations in the future.

Glossary

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1. (***Return***)
    a. *Dashimaki Tamago*—***Japanese Rolled Omelet***: “The typical egg dish in Japanese cuisine, dashimaki tamago (出し巻き卵, Japanese rolled omelette) is made by rolling thin layers of egg in the frypan.” — RecipeTin Japan

    b. *Kinpira Gobou*—***Braised Burdock Root***: “Stir-fried and simmered in a sweet soy sauce, Kinpira Gobo is a traditional Japanese dish made with shredded burdock root and carrot, garnished with sesame seeds.” — Just One Cookbook

2. (***Return***)
    a. *TPO*: An abbreviation of Japanese origin meaning **Time**, **Place**, **Occasion**; it refers to the ability of acting in accordance to a given situation, carrying yourself or dressing up differently depending on the occasion, or in this case, knowing when you ought to treat others with respect.

3. (***Return***)
    a. *Bento*—***Boxed Lunch***: “A bento is a single-portion boxed meal usually composed of a carb (usually rice or noodles), a protein (usually meat or fish), and an assortment of pickled or cooked vegetables.” — JapanObjects

4. (**Return**)
    a. *Dango*—***Rice Dumplings***: "Dango are sweet Japanese rice dumplings that come in various flavors, such as red bean paste (anko), green tea, and soy sauce syrup.

        Dango are the main offerings brought to the deities on festive occasions. The dango brought as offerings usually come in three colors: white, red and green." — Matcha–JP

5. (***Return***)
    a. *Kadou; Ikebana*—***Flower Arrangement***: "Ikebana or Kadou ("*the way of theflowers*") is an original form of Japanese art that involves an arrangement of a variety of plants. Kadou and Ikebana are technically the same.

        However, the term Kadou refers not only to the beauty of the flowers but also requires manners, techniques, mental and physical training as well. It is considered to be one of the "ways" of the Japanese beliefs. Therefore, a work of the Kadou is referred to as "Ikebana flower arranging." — Matcha–JP

(While Kadou is often translated to *Flower Arrangement*, translating it that way doesn't convey the idiosyncrasies of the art very well.)

6. (***Return***)
    a. *IC Card*—***Integrated Circuit Card***: "An IC card, or smartcard, is a rechargeable plastic prepaid card used in Japan to pay train, subway, bus and monorail fares, and for e-payment at convenience and other stores, vending machines, station coin lockers, parking lots, and more." — Japan-experience

7. (***Return***)
    a. *Kouhai*—***Junior***: Kouhai translates literally to 'junior.' It is the opposite of *senpai*, meaning one's senior. Both **senpai** and **kouhai** are often used in schools and workplaces—both types of institution having an established hierarchy within them.

8. (***Return***)
    a. *Ware nabe ni toji buta* (破れ鍋に綴じ蓋)—***A broken pot with a patched lid***: "A Japanese idiom conveying the message that everyone has a suitable partner somewhere, and that said partner is someone similar to the person in question.

        Seems to have the implication that broken people may find solace in another broken person as their partner." — Researched from dictionary.goo.ne.jp and homemate.co.jp

9. (***Return***)
    a. *Naijo no Kou* (内助の功)—***Help from behind the scenes***: "Naijo no kou is a phrase used to praise the efforts of a wife who supports her husband from behind the scenes (though it is not strictly limited to a wife.) Oftentimes, it is used when the husband has gained some sort of recognition from wider society.

Similar phrases in English include: **Backbone of one's success**, or **foundation of one's accomplishments**." — Researched from mama.smt.docomo.ne.jp, dictionary.goo.ne.jp, and jlearn.net

10. (***Return***)
    a. *Chawanmushi* (茶碗蒸し)—***Japanese Steamed Egg Custard***: "*Chawan* (tea cup) *mushi* (steam) literally means teacup steamed egg custard. Unlike other egg custard, Chawanmushi is not sweet but it has a savory flavor packed with umami from dashi stock and topping ingredients." — Chopstick Chronicles

    b. *Tamago Kinchaku* (卵巾着)—**Egg Purse**: "A dish using fried tofu as a purse to cook a boiled egg inside. First, oil is removed from the fried tofu before the egg is cracked inside, and the opening of the tofu is closed using a toothpick. The purse is then slowly boiled in a pot with seasoning to create a juicy egg dish with rich flavor." — Yukari's Kitchen (YouTube Recipe), Kurashiru

11. (***Return***)
    Mexican Impossible Cake: "Also known as a chocoflan, the tasty confection defies logic. Here's the mystery: The layers invert while the cake is cooking. The batter goes into the oven in a bundt pan holding a layer of chocolate cake batter covered by a layer of flan (some recipes call for lining the pan with a layer of caramel before adding the cake batter). When it comes out of the oven, magically, the chocolate cake layer is on the top. When the bundt pan holding the

cooked cake is turned upside down onto a plate, you end up with a confection of chocolate cake, topped by flan, and—if you include the caramel layer—it's all wrapped up in a sweet coating." — Tasting Table

After ***MUCH*** searching, this is the only dessert that we found that fit the description in the chapter, though the original Japanese does not name the recipe. — ***Doram***

12. (***Return***)

a. *Sakuragai* (桜貝)—**Nitidotellina nitidula**: "A species of tellin commonly found along sandy coasts. As a small type of mollusk, it's characterized by its smooth, shiny shell.

It usually inhabits areas with shallower waters, often burrowing into nearby sand or mud. Its shell is usually elongated and narrow, and can be identified by its distinct pink color." — RomajiDesu, CollinsDictionary

(While technically not a seashell, we opted against translating it to 'clam' in this context due to potential misunderstanding as to what 'body part' Amane was trying to 'part.')